



~~DEATH PENALTY FOR A GHOST IN CHINA~~

~~A NOVELLA~~

~~BY KIM CANCER~~

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***FOR* 任雪**

“What, no way this place was built on execution grounds! You’re kidding, right?” Marco asked in a cynical tone, his eyes thinned. Then he hung his head back down to his plate, picked awkwardly with his chopsticks through a heap of oily sliced cabbages slathered in red chilis and chopped garlic.

“Nope, it’s true, I heard it from Jim, the Chinese teacher who lives in our building. It makes sense, though. I mean, how do you think they got the land? Have you seen property prices in China?” I answered before I sipped on a metal bowl of egg drop soup.

I licked my lower lip, continued, “Property in China is like gold. The acres they got out here, this school, this near the city. We’re talking 10 figures, probably, US Dollars.”

“Dog, we’re like an hour from downtown,” Marco lamented and snorted loudly, his nostrils flaring. The spicy cabbages were loosening up his sinuses.

Man-bun Matty, the rosy-faced Londoner, chuckled at his naivete. Muttered something about “fresh off the plane.”

“An hour is close for me. My last school was two and a half hours, to only the outskirts of the city center. This isn’t too bad,” the Man-bun posited, peering up from his phone.

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, sniffled, and continued, “That school was shuttered because it was built over a toxic waste site. The worst of it was at the football pitch and running grounds. Students and teachers exercising there were having bloody noses, fainting spells, and one came down with leukemia before the word got out. Bloody hell, I’m lucky I don’t take exercise. So, anyhow, after that, I’m okay with execution grounds.”

Man-bun was dressed, as usual, in Hanfu, traditional Chinese clothing, today wearing a shiny gold emperor robe, images of dragons stitched along its sides.

Marco was having issues processing what he’d heard, blinked his bleary eyes, and said, nervously, “Not me. I’m not okay with it. Like, an execution ground? There

has to be ghosts here. Evil, wicked ghosts... This might explain the nightmares I've been having since I got here."

I'd also been having terrible, menacing nightmares since I'd arrived in China, and visions too, things I couldn't explain, things I'd never seen before...

"I might have to call my mom back in Florida. She's into Santeria," said Marco, setting his chopsticks down on his tray.

"Is Santeria the same as Voodoo?" Man-bun Matty asked and snarled.

"Oh no, it's way better..." Marco said, his breathing turning stertorous, "I'm not a practitioner, but this place could turn me into a Babaloricha, alright."

"Santeria's more about syncretism than Voodoo, I think," I averred, checking my phone for no real reason, other than to lessen the weirdness of the moment.

"Do you think there's any poltergeists here? Evil dead that can suck you into your TV?" asked a snickering Man-bun.

"Nah," I said, sarcastically, "no one watches TV anymore. If there are poltergeists, they'd suck you into your phone.

"Hell, I think that's already happening to my students. Probably happening to us all. Must be poltergeists on Twitter, YouTube for sure, some of the comments I've seen there, almost makes me want to cancel my VPN..." I said, myself actually scrolling through Twitter.

While I was trying to lighten the mood some, Marco grew more uncomfortable, was genuinely unnerved.

Marco, the 40ish bodybuilder, Cuban American, was dressed today in his normal attire- an all-black Miami Heat tracksuit, and he rose to his feet, cried out, "The ghosts won't get me. NOT ME, DOG!" and he flung out his phone, started blasting Cypress Hill's "I Ain't Going Out Like That," sang along to the words, then slipped in his white earbuds and stalked off, still mouthing to the music, bobbing his head.

Man-bun shrugged his shoulders and we ate in silence, staring at our phones before heading off to our afternoon classes.



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“What the hell are you doing in China?” my uncle asked me, belligerently, over Skype, soon after I’d arrived.

Well, I’d come to work, to teach at a university, in hopes of a better position back home...

The university I accepted a position at had only been open for 10 years, as a partnership with the Florida university system.

It was yet another American school hungry to cash in on the growing Chinese market.

Given the dismal state of most Chinese universities, and how desperate many parents in China were to send their kids to a Western school, having a Western school open in China made sense. And many such international schools had opened. From kindergarten through college, international schools were all the rage.

Which is where I came in. I’d been an adjunct professor, teaching cultural studies courses at Florida International University, in Miami, plus a few local Broward, Miami-Dade community colleges.

Life for an adjunct is no cakewalk. It used to be a college professor could score a tenure track position pretty easily, with the right credentials, of course, but these days, as even higher education has become part of the gig economy, tenured professorships are growing increasingly rare.

After scraping together a meager existence in my hometown of Miami, I decided to jump at the chance of a possible tenure track post that FIU was offering. However, the post wasn't in sunny Florida. Nope, it was far, far away from the land of swaying palm trees. Far as can be imagined. Far east.

In the industrial heartland of central China. In Nongzhou, Henan.

Not exactly my dream job. But, if I stuck with it for the entirety of the 3-year contract, I could, possibly, secure a tenured position in the International Studies Department back at FIU in Miami. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. Plus, it allowed the once in a lifetime opportunity to travel in Asia.

So, I sold off most of my stuff, packed up only a few essentials, like clothes, my computer, an external drive stuffed with eBooks, and navigated a maze of bureaucracy to attain my Chinese visa. Finally, on a cloudy September morning, I boarded a plane bound for China.



三

I landed in Shanghai, stayed my first couple days there, doing the tourist thing.

I was awed by the metropolis, its varied architecture, dazzling skyline, and endless cultural, historical attractions. It was like a larger, more crowded, more lit up, more neon, more exotic and more futuristic version of New York City.

However, my school and its surroundings were a far cry from Shanghai's towering, glass-plated buildings, Lamborghinis, and grandeur.

As I rode in the carriage of a bullet train, I was amazed at how fast the train traveled. It was as if it glided supersonically, flying over the tracks, was propelling like a bullet shot towards its destination. However, gazing out the window, I was dismayed as the sky got darker and grayer the further we got from Shanghai, and noticed that the people looked poorer, darker and grayer, sullen too...

Henan province is widely ridiculed in China as a backwater, similar to how West Virginia is viewed by most of America. However, more recently Henan has also been known for its factories and pollution, its smoggy skies of gray. The air quality reaching its abysmal apex in the bleak days of fall and winter when the pollutants leave the air with a flavor like a mouthful of car exhaust.

Having done very little traveling outside Florida and the Caribbean, arriving in Henan in fall and not seeing the sun, at all, was tough to handle, and I was experiencing seasonal affective disorder lethargy almost immediately, the initial elation of being in China subsiding quickly...

Nongzhou, the city nearest my school, was dreary, almost as crowded as Shanghai, but lacking much in the way of culture, only having restaurants, KTVs, clothing stores, phone stores, grocery stores, and mostly vacant shopping malls. The buildings were drab, identical, rectangular, strangely empty edifices contrasting bizarrely to the place's overpopulation.

Driving out of the city, en route to the college, I looked out the taxi's windows, studied the barren environs, its farms, factories, square blocks of dead apartment buildings. Along the way I saw scattered clumps of withered old men, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, the men seated on plastic stools, selling fruit and vegetables from baskets alongside the road.

I saw several active and abandoned construction sites and occasional small hills, many of which appeared to have been mined; the hills had large chunks missing, open dirt wounds on their tops and sides. Alongside the mountains were winding rivers of the most curious shades of brown or green. The highways we drove on were in pristine condition, however, newer looking than I would think...

The college's campus was vast, had green trees, flower bushes everywhere, many state-of-the-art square, curvy glass buildings, but, like the city, the campus was also mostly empty, much of it still under construction. Along the campus's perimeter were active factories and empty, hollowed out buildings, half-built office buildings and a colossally large petrochemical plant, a dark metallic superstructure, with twin smokestacks billowing steady upward streams.

It was depressing, the surroundings. Looked like a bomb had hit it.

But the air, the polluted air was even worse and had lived up to its infamous reputation.

I swear, the air not only burned my lungs and throat, but also ate at my mind.

Since I'd arrived in China, even in Shanghai, even after the jet lag had worn off, I'd had cognitive issues, trouble thinking straight.

And once I got to the school, after hearing of the ghosts, my first night on campus, at that pickup basketball game by the cafeteria, ever since then, I'd been plagued by insomnia, and, what's worse, when I did manage to sleep, I started to have wild, weird and terrifying dreams. Nightmares like I'd never had before.



四

The nightmares fit a pattern. I'd be in my apartment building's corridor, find myself in vivid encounters with angry, confused souls, mostly men, wearing dark blue prison clothes with a bar code like number on the front and back of their shirts.

They were in pain, these men. Physical pain. Psychic pain. Many were riddled full of bullet holes, and they were holding shovels, trying to dig into the floor. Their festering, open gashes, flesh wounds were streaming dark red blood as they stabbed their shovels fecklessly at the tile.

In these recurring dreams, my teeth were falling from my mouth and I was spitting my teeth out like bloody white seeds from a fruit, and I'd be crawling down my apartment building's first floor hallway, hearing shrieks and grunts, seeing through doors, seeing angry, wild-eyed men, men with shaven heads, men in dark blue prison jumpsuits banging on the doors, doors that'd been chained, welded shut.

The men just slapping, thrashing, headbutting the doors; a couple kicking at the doors spastically, the men shaking like epileptics.

Then I'd see a headless man, lurching towards me from the end of the hallway. The man was in a navy blue boilersuit, with an open gash in his chest, and he held a pair of blood-dripping eyeballs in one hand and was lifting a butcher knife, wildly slashing at the air with his other hand.

Nearly every night, I had these dreams, if I could sleep. Which I started not wanting to do, because the dreams were so surreal and upsetting. I was also being awoken nearly every morning, sometimes in the small hours of night, by jackhammering, drilling that rattled the whole of my modest apartment like the voice of an angry God.

I reported the noise to the school, but they told me no construction was going on in the building. Other teachers heard it as well, but no one could locate the drilling's source.

I started taking pills, Xanax, so I could finally sleep and stay asleep. I'd read that Xanax intensifies dreams in some people. But for me it was the opposite. Xanax not only allowed me to sleep, but it also stopped the dreams. If ever I didn't take the pills, however, the dreams came back, even more frighteningly...

The dreams, the night terrors, always with me spitting bloody teeth from my mouth, crawling on my belly, sometimes through swarms of cockroaches scurrying about the floor. And those men, their sounds, shrieks, shrill voices, their banging, clanking on the doors. The headless man at the end of the hallway, the man in the hallway sometimes stabbing and slashing and churning the butcher knife inside his open chest wound.

I'd never experienced visions, dreams of the sort. And the visions began to bleed over, enter into my days. Diurnal sightings. I'd see the figures, at the top of stairs,

staring down from a window, in the distance trying to dig holes. They'd lock eyes with me and then vanish, go back to hiding in the smog, where I knew they lived.

I don't know why I told my coworkers about the history of the school. Maybe it was me who was evil, and I selfishly wanted to unhook the ghosts' claws from my flesh, pass off and stick the ghosts to others. Maybe it was that misery loves company, and I wanted to share the ghosts. Or maybe on a subconscious level I thought that getting the ghosts into the open would help dispel the visions and rid the ghosts, rid the insomnia.

But talking about the ghosts, sharing them wouldn't rid them. The ghosts would stay. They had jumped from my nightmares into my days. They had stuck themselves to me. They were with me, a part of me now.

Little did I know that soon enough, I'd be talking and lying with one of them.



五

As the term went on, day to day life, work was becoming more difficult- and more bizarre. Classes would often be canceled or moved to other classrooms, much of the time without the school informing me, and I'd have to search the hallways, searching the cavernous, mostly empty teaching building, looking for my class.

While looking about the building, searching for my students, I'd see shadowy rooms with emaciated men in tiger chairs, being lashed with a truncheon by men in dark black uniforms. Or sometimes the rooms were filled with equipment, machinery, workers seated in rows, wearing leg irons, assembling Christmas lights. After doing a doubletake, glancing back at the rooms, they'd be empty, the cavernous lecture halls filled with nothing but air...

When I did have class, the students, started to shapeshift. From humans to dragons. Humans to rabbits. Humans to rats. And all the different animals of the Chinese Zodiac. The students, the passive lot, who rarely spoke, would shift into sheep, or dogs, or snakes, and sit staring, watching my every move.

I wondered if they could smell my blood, my trepidation, as I attempted to carry on my lectures, seeing a lecture hall full of horses holding phones, tablets and pencils. They'd switch back to human when the bell rang, though, and I'd need to rush to the bathroom to do deep-breathing exercises just to get my pulse under control...

Breathing was becoming tougher, too. As the leaves turned, the air grew sharper, and I was beginning to notice even more pollution in the skies. The air, my lungs, were stinging like they were filled with acid. The air drier than bone, too. The air sour, like spoiled milk, and I'd have regular nosebleeds, cough up chunks of black, gobs of blood...

The rooms around the school, including classrooms were unexplainably hot or cold, even those with thermostats...

Although the campus was newly built, I was starting to find that some of the buildings looked to be 50 or so years old, moldy, with cracks running down the walls, graying and blackened exteriors, crumbling facades, and on some of the half-built buildings, I'd never see any construction being performed, the buildings standing bare as skeletons.

What's worse, one day after class I found the elevator wasn't working, so I gamboled to the end of the hallway, opened a door that'd been marked "Exit." Expecting stairs, my heart skipped a beat and I abruptly stopped in my tracks when I peered down and discovered that the door led to nothing, only air! Had I stepped a foot further I'd have plummeted from the 7th floor of the building!

I immediately reported the incident to the school. The secretary responded that they'd have a repairman look into it, and then she replied later that day, saying the repairman had found no such door. "Impossible," I said, but, sure enough, the next day, before class, I went to the same hallway and found that there was no door...



六

The drilling sounds in the morning were becoming louder and louder, waking me up every day, often around 4 a.m., if I could sleep at all.

The insomnia got worse. It'd grown malignant. I'd have to take Xanax, every night, otherwise I couldn't sleep a wink.

It wasn't only me. Marco, the others, they'd been looking rough as well, their complexions sallow...

I was starting to believe the school itself to be a ghost or maybe a vampire that was sucking away our collective life force, cruelly drinking away our vitality and sleep...

Marco told me after breakfast that the lecture stage in his classroom collapsed as he and two of his students stood on it. Luckily, besides a couple bumps and bruises, no one was seriously injured.

“I asked the school, three times, to fix it,” Marco seethed, glancing up angrily at the creamy gray sky as we were walking down a tree-lined promenade, on the way to give our classes. Even under the penumbra of sagging clouds, I could see that the lines on Marco’s face were growing deeper, especially the crinkles on his forehead. The dude had seemed to age five years in only the short time we’d been there.

Another of our colleagues was with us, Rick, a late middle-aged Clevelander with leathery skin, platinum blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

We called Rick “Rooster” because of the spiky shock of hair he had running along his scalp, which, along with his pointy, chinless face, sort of made him look like a chicken.

As Rooster was walking with us, he lamented that “furniture, equipment was starting to disappear from his classrooms. And chairs, new chairs would snap. A student, a skinny one, cracked one the other day and landed on his ass.”

Rooster went on, scowling as he spoke, “There’s been buttlords of roaches in my apartment, too. Not to mention the mosquitoes, and the stray dog that ran in once. There’s been rats in my kitchen, rats... Ugh, the first-floor sucks... There’s a gaping hole in my balcony, too. I keep bugging the school to fix it, but they haven’t yet. There was a frigging hornet in there yesterday, a massive one...”

“Hey, Matty, was it you who said that hornets and wasps would fly into his classroom all the time last term?” I asked, then swirled and wiped my tongue at my teeth, checking to see if they were still there.

Man-bun nodded, made a facial expression like he had a stomachache and told us that the roof caved in that classroom, too, and that it was a newly-built room, to boot, but fortunately he didn’t have class the day the roof collapsed and thankfully the room was empty at the time.

Man-bun Matty is one of only three foreign teachers remaining from last term.

Matty started telling us that these were the challenges of living in China and that most foreigners couldn't hack it, only survive a year or two.

Either the pollution bothers them too much, like one lady whose face turned into a pepperoni pizza, or they drink so much they can't function, or their demons take hold and they go crazy, literally, spaz out, run naked through campus or start fistfights with other teachers or students or security guards or they pack up, leave in the middle of the night, make a midnight run, or, in the most extreme case, there's a suicide, like the New Zealander who jumped from a building, and there was one Japanese teacher a couple years back who died from leaving his cooking gas canister on, died from breathing the fumes.

"I don't know if that was a... Think what's his name is living in his apartment... Don't tell him..."

Rooster stopped Man-bun there. "I guess I know why they were gruff about answering too many questions in the job interview. I was interviewed by the old fidgety guy from Tasmania. Someone said he's been here since the school opened and doesn't talk to anyone, except one or two Chinese teachers."

Man-bun concurred, chuckled, and said, "That's right. He's invisible. You'll never see him anywhere on campus except the bicycle shop where he pumps his bike tires. He practically runs away from other foreigners. The only time you'll talk to him is during the Skype interview."

"Maybe he's a ghost. He's one of them. There are foreigners in Chinese prisons," Marco said, his eyes lighting up, "But they're not having me. Nah, dog. I'm not ghost food. I'm not their doll. I'm fighting back. I'm starting Santeria. These ghosts might be bandits, bandits on the road, pirates on the rivers... But they'll see. I'll fight their fire with fire. Magic with magic!"

Marco kicked at a pile of litter on the ground and a plastic bottle launched off into the smog. The four of us parted ways, off to our respective classes.

Looking down at the pile of litter that Marco had kicked, instead of an empty Styrofoam box, I saw a pool of blood, with a beating human heart in its center, encircled in ice cubes.

I blinked my eyes twice, and the ice, heart, blood, and Styrofoam box were all gone.

I shook my head and flinched as an old pot-bellied security guard brushed by me, only inches away, riding on a creaky bicycle. The security guard snarled at Rooster and hocked up and launched a gob of spit at the ground.



七

The drilling had stopped, thankfully, but I hadn't slept in three days. After what I saw in my dreams, sleep wasn't what I wanted. Sleep or no sleep, though, I was thinking there'd be more, more ghosts, worse ghosts, and that the ghosts were probably hungry...

Lacking sleep left me both alive and dead. I felt like my head was slurry, wet and sloshy with cytoplasm. I lay in bed, supine, awake to the night, reading my phone in the dark, my room black as marble.

A story popped up on my phone, a local news story of three people drowning to death in a manure pit. A maintenance worker, trying to fix a septic tank, had

plunged in, and two others rushed to help him, and they too were swallowed into the pit of shit.

Reading it provided me a guilty bit of schadenfreude. Despite my current woes of ghosts, insomnia, and filthy air, there was really nothing I could imagine worse than drowning, suffocating in a pool of shit. That being how one leaves the Earth. What a horrific fate.

Perhaps a “ghost of shit,” a violent, vengeful janitor’s ghost sucked them in. What a bilious, malicious spirit that must be...

Then another story popped up. An anonymous news article from tomorrow, written in the future tense, saying there’s going to be a dreadful traffic accident. The article didn’t mention ghosts, but I knew the spirits would have something to do with it.

The story said that a deliveryman on a motorbike, next to our school, will die in gruesome fashion, be run over by a semitruck. Aghast, I couldn’t read past the opening paragraph and clicked off my phone, popped a handful of pills and drifted off...

Sure enough, the next day, walking back from class, I witnessed the aftermath, the carnage, the young deliveryman’s body split in two halves. I’d seen plenty of gore on TV, movies, in video games, but seeing it firsthand would be forever etched into the eyes of my mind.

I’d suspected it’d been ghosts on the roads. The ghosts must have caused the truck driver to swerve suddenly. I bet the apparitions I’d seen had escaped from my dreams and were appearing on the roads, day and night, frightening drivers, causing accidents...

After witnessing the grisly accident scene, I had to take a walk around campus to get my head right. I passed by the Tasmanian in the small park near the gymnasium, eyed him solemnly. He was seated on a stone bench, under a bamboo tree, practicing calligraphy, Chinese characters. He looked so Zen, so peaceful drawing them.

So, I decided I’d copy his practice. Went to the stationery store, bought a brush and paper and then went back to my apartment, began writing my own

characters, stroke after stroke, tracing the particles, the radicals. The calligraphy, it was calming, soothing. It lifted my mind, set it at ease, and I didn't see any ghosts for a couple days.

A few days later, though, after the accident, the drilling started again, waking me whenever I slept, causing me to have anxiety and trembling spells.

Worse yet, a new ghost, a lower torso, the severed waist, legs of the dead deliveryman, started walking around my apartment, walking through doors, on the ceilings and through walls, the legs maybe trying to find their way into or away from God.

To try to ward the torso off, freeze out the drilling noises, I'd draw the Chinese characters for quiet: “安静”, drawing the characters again, again, and again.

It helped, at first, drawing that, and it scared the torso away every time I wrote it. And along with eating handfuls of Xanax, I started wearing a blindfold and earplugs to bed, and was enjoying the serene, dreamless slumber I was getting.



八

I'd been taking the pills, stronger doses, every night. Had been avoiding dreams. But not avoiding ghosts, since I was seeing the torso again, the severed lower half of the deliveryman's body, in his same bright orange pants. That damn torso, running around my fucking apartment.

I'd been hanging the pieces of paper with 安静 written on them around the apartment, but that was no longer keeping away the walking legs. The ghost had no respect. It accompanied the drilling sounds much of the time.

The torso had been running around my kitchen a lot, too. That's usually where I'd spot it.

One evening, I was chopping vegetables, carrots, and accidentally sliced open the tip of a finger. Bleeding profusely, I was running to the bathroom to grab my first-aid kit when I found that the torso was standing in the bathroom door's threshold, blocking my entrance.

My hand a bloody mess, I screamed and cursed at the ghost, reached out to swat it away from the door. Droplets of my blood splattered onto it, and the blood hit the torso like water landing in a skillet full of steaming hot oil, causing a ferocious pop and burst, singeing the ghost's skin, and the torso tore off running from the doorway.

It was like I'd thrown holy water at a vampire. So I knew then what to do. In the bathroom, I held my hand over the sink, collected my blood in the drinking glass I'd used for brushing my teeth.

After I'd rung out, bled out a good bit, I wrapped up my finger with a bandage.

Then, carrying my blood, I rushed to my living room, where I'd been doing calligraphy. Pouting, I stood hunched over a table and dipped my calligraphy brush into the cup and painted 安静 in blood, on five separate sheets of paper.

I collected the papers, stomped about the domicile, taped the new sheets over the previous 安静 sheets.

Then I wrapped up the blood glass in plastic wrap, set it next to my calligraphy brush, saved it for later.

After that, the torso disappeared from my apartment.

But the drilling sounds got even louder, waking me up at around 4 to 6 a.m. every morning, four days in a row.



九

I think the torso had escaped back out to the road. Perhaps was animated by a malevolent spirit, doing its bidding. Maybe I should have kept it in my apartment where it wasn't really hurting anyone, just being mischievous, mostly.

Out on the road, in the same spot where the semitruck had struck the deliveryman, there'd been a series of strange car accidents where cars' breaks

failed or their lights would switch off at night, cause collisions with other vehicles, often smashing into motorbikes. 8 people died in just one week...

But I'd not personally seen any ghosts for a few days, and the drilling had cooled down to a barely audible hum. I'd been taking pills, so I wasn't dreaming and was far happier that way.

Marco, who'd gotten heavy into Santeria, had taken to wearing traditional Cuban island clothing and an elaborate charm around his neck made of bird feathers, clamshells, and beads.

Squinting his eyes and frowning, his fingers tapping on the table like oil derricks, he told me over breakfast that "a lot of ghosts want to escape, rest in peace, but they can't because they're stuck in a space between Hell and Earth, so if they sell a soul, or souls, to a demon, the captured souls can take the ghosts' place, and then the ghosts can escape and rest... That deliveryman, he's doing a demon's bidding; he's collected, sold and bartered souls... He's already got 8. My Mom said that'll be enough, likely. Still, don't ride a motorcycle or even a bicycle on the roads for now."

From the window in the cafeteria, we looked outside, saw Rooster, who was barefoot, wearing a Beijing bikini and jorts, despite the cold. He was hopping on a pogo stick, with a mad glint in his eyes, on his way to teach a class.

Rooster really had been losing it. He'd had a bout of explosive diarrhea in one of his classes yesterday. Over the last week, he'd been complaining about the drilling sounds more than anyone, spazzing out about it online, in the teacher WeChat group, posting floods of shitposts, along with random strange, outlandish outbursts, much of it gibberish.

He'd been drinking too much, too, drunk in his classes, yelling and throwing textbooks and chalk at students. There was a running bet amongst us foreigners that he'd be the first teacher this term to be fired.

"Think it's safe to ride a pogo stick?" I asked Marco, who only grimaced, stood up and walked away with a sullen expression, rubbing his rabbit's foot key chain.



+

The accidents continued. Perhaps the torso didn't have enough souls. Or more was going on.

Yesterday, a truck driving by the school had its cargo load escape. A bunch of loose barrels rolled out and struck a cleaner on the side of the road, bowling over, crushing and killing the elderly woman instantly. Rooster had been hopping by on his pogo stick when he saw her mangled corpse, the crowd circled around her, snapping cell phone pics.

"She survived the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, only for this..." Rooster said to me, standing on the front steps of our building. He was visibly shaken, his eyes glassy and red from crying.

"It was someone's mother, someone's grandma. She's not a statistic!" shouted Rooster, at the rubbernecking gaggle of students walking by. The students glanced at him curiously, then hurried their pace to a gallop...

Another unfortunate campus occurrence: the elevators in a teaching building froze, trapping a teacher, a Chinese teacher inside for over 4 hours.

The school claimed it'd be fixed, but then the next week, in the same elevator, the elevator cable snapped, dropped like an anchor and two security guards inside

the elevator died. The classes on the upper floor of the building were then moved to a lower floor.

A couple days later, an escalator at the nearby subway station malfunctioned, sucking a school administrator down into the escalator's mechanical teeth inside, eating her alive...

Marco was wearing ever more eccentric clothing, beads, would whisper chants, spells. I thought the school might say something to him about it. But maybe they just figured, since he was Cuban, it was his heritage and respected it. He wasn't involving any of the students in it or discussing it in his lectures. The school also liked taking photos of him in his brightly colored garb, his robes, and dashikis. The school was using his pictures on its website and in their brochures...

Marco said he understood the ghosts. He knew. He swore the accidents were attributable to hungry and angry ghosts. That the ghosts were like the cockroaches in Rooster's apartment, that they'd been here before us, will be here after us. Marco said he'd been sleeping well and safe, though, since his Santeria skills and spells were improving by the day.

He'd had a few scorpions in his apartment, which was worrying, but he had managed to kill them with a bug zapper, used them in a spell.

"Lemons into lemonade, dog," he'd growled.

Man-bun Matty, the 9-year China vet, had a different opinion, wasn't convinced at all. He attributed the accidents, incidents to China's notoriously poor safety standards. Bribes of safety inspectors being rife. Half-assed work, construction done daily.

But, for me, after having read several Stephen King novels, watched countless horror films, I thought to the part of the movie where the protagonist goes to the library or online to research the history of the area. With the school being built on the grounds of a former prison, it couldn't be a coincidence, it couldn't be mere negligence.

I believed Marco, I believed in the ghosts, I believed in eschatology, and I had to know more...



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It was hard to find anything in English. But using translation software, I found much more on Chinese websites and I stumbled across a brief article about a young woman, only 24, and stunningly beautiful, who was executed, here, by firing squad.

The gorgeous youth had been convicted of setting fire to her workplace, killing several people inside.

The article had a picture of the field where she'd been shot. Recognizing the landscape, I looked up the area on Baidu maps, and sure enough, the prison, the jailhouse, the execution grounds, were indeed right here, where the campus now sits.

And sifting through the search results on Baidu, I located a few old pictures of the prison, too.

The jailhouse was right where I was sitting, where the teachers' living quarters were now located. This was the spot of the prison. It hit me like a sledgehammer to the head, seeing it on the map, seeing its picture, and recognizing the hills in the distance that I could see on a rare day that wasn't too smoggy.

I wanted to learn more of the prisoners here, at this prison, and through the further reaches of my deep dive, I'd found that this had been a prison for the worst of offenders, many of whom were sentenced to die. I found case stories, articles about several violent offenders here who'd murdered their families or coworkers in fits of rage, and one infamous soldier who'd stolen a gun and gone on a shooting spree in a village nearby, as well as several arsonists, most of whom had attacked and set alight public buses and packed restaurants.

All of the offenders had landed here. Ended their days on this soil.

There were intellectuals, political prisoners too, hundreds of them during the Cultural Revolution, those marked as "revisionists." I read a story that said that so many intellectuals were executed that eventually soldiers started to throw the "state enemies" off the roof of the jailhouse so the army could ration ammunition...

I'd been online for hours, digging farther and farther down into a death penalty rabbit hole.

It was getting late, and although I'd taken a handful of Xanax, the gentle tyrant of sleep still hadn't opened his arms. So, I stayed awake, sat by the window, which was wet with breath, and I researched more about executions in China. I found that most executions in communist-era China, still to this day, are carried out by firing squad. Soldiers from the army serving as executioners. The condemned marched out to the execution ground.

The condemned are made to kneel and receive a bullet to the back of the head by a member of the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary organization in China that's tasked with internal security, riot control, amongst other duties.

Before the execution, the condemned has a finger pricked with a blade, presses a fingerprint in blood on the execution orders.

Family members, victims aren't allowed to attend the executions. Nowadays the public isn't allowed to watch, either, though every so often pictures or video would leak out from a concealed smartphone or from a camera nearby.

On Youku, China's alternative to YouTube, I watched a couple pre-execution vids, showing gaggles of soldiers marching the condemned out to wherever they'd

administer the ultimate punishment (usually a field or ravine). One of the condemned I saw was a drug dealer from Sichuan whose face looked made of stone as he was led out of a police van, his arms trussed behind his back...

I felt a chill misting up my spine. Peering around, it was like I was living in a cemetery, like there were venomous ghosts around me. I guess anywhere you are in China, a land with 5000 years of history, anywhere you are, like hundreds, thousands of years ago, there was someone there. Anywhere you are could have been a graveyard at one point, or the site of horrific murder, war, floods, fires, famines, or accidents.

But to so knowingly be living in this cemetery, this place pregnant in agony and death, to know...

That there were ghosts everywhere. That I was a guest in their home.

And their plans, their designs, the ghosts' agenda, particularly the venomous ghosts, the angry ghosts, concerned me most.

I decided to take another sleeping pill and listened to Sam Harris's meditation app. I find his voice soothing. It calms me. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and ignored the ghosts. I focused on Sam's slow cadence. His tone. Soon after he began speaking, I was finally able to pass out.



十二

When I awoke to the next morning, a severed arm was floating in the air, running its long bony, frigid fingers through my hair. I sprung up and slapped wildly at its cold flesh, and it disappeared and vaporized into the damp chill of the room.

I slapped myself in the face, told myself it was the dreams eating at me again, and I dressed, cleaned myself up, tried to focus on other things, like my lecture I'd deliver that afternoon.

But it was tough to shake off those icy fingers in my hair and to not think of what I'd learned last night, those stories. Those teachers thrown off the roof of the building. Those people, their cases, the people they killed, and how scores here were knelt and shot in the back of the head. I wondered what thoughts must have gone through their minds as they were taking that final walk.

I was having trouble really focusing on anything, though, my mind scattered.

When I was brushing my teeth, I found that the severed arm was holding my toothbrush, brushing for me, and in the sink were globs of bloody teeth.

I retched and grabbed the arm, the limb cold as a chunk of ice, and began to curse at it and beat it into the bathroom wall and spit foamy white toothpaste froth at it. Seconds later, it again disappeared, and I discovered I was slapping my toothbrush at the wall and that the sink was empty.

I took my razor, cut a short slice on my forearm, dipped my finger in the running warm blood and wrote, on the bathroom wall, a 口, the character for mouth, hoping the severed arm would stick itself in there instead...

When I got to the cafeteria, Marco was dressed in a long, flowing red robe with gold trim, wearing several sets of bright green bead necklaces and had a crown of thorns and chicken feathers on his head. He was drinking a cup of chicken blood mixed with herbs.

"Omiero," he said, offering me a sip. I politely declined.

He continued, "Keeps the spirits away. I'm also making spirit dolls. I caught three evil spirits with the dolls, two murderers and a thief... It's like luring out a snake, with the doll. I set it near my altar, I dance, chant and drum, and the spirits are sucked right into the doll, trapped in... Then I offer the dolls to Zhong Kui. You still don't believe in Santeria, amigo?"

"Marco, I don't know what I believe," I told him, rubbing my weary eyes, which were dry, full of sand.

Marco stood up, lifted his tray. His eyes bulged. "I've changed my name to 'Marcoba.' You can still call me 'Marco,' but, just so you know, dog, I am a Marcoba."

He nodded at me, turned and walked off.

Two other foreign teachers sat down to the foreigner table and joined me. One was Fat Elvis, a Canadian, 30ish dude, who earned the nickname because he looked like the fat version of Elvis, mutton chop sideburns and everything... Most days Fat Elvis stunk like body odor or liquor. We appreciated it more when, like today, it was liquor...

The other guy, an older guy, I think was from Australia. His name I forgot. He had a bushy ponytail, but the front of his gray, brown and black hair was balding, giving him a look sort of like a dead raccoon was hanging from the back of his head.

Raccoon Head wasn't looking too hot. "Nightmares," he said, sitting down.

"Me also," Fat Elvis said, "you?" he asked, peering over at me, fixing his chopsticks in his hand, angling them at his breakfast dumplings.

"Not recently," I told them. I wasn't in the mood to discuss my pharmaceuticals.

"The ghost rumors are swirling 'round. I'm thinking Maradona has the right idea," said Raccoon Head, before he chomped into a red apple.

"Maradona?" I asked, my eyebrow upturned.

"The robe guy cunt, into Voodoo, or bloody whatever," said Raccoon Head, making no attempt to cover his mouth as he loudly chewed. The filthy animal.

“Marco, or Marcoba, right, maybe we should join him for a ritual later at his house, buttfuck a chicken or whatnot,” said Fat Elvis.

Fat Elvis had been my pick to be fired first. Guy was constantly perving on students. He had the look of a tree jumper.

“I’ve been having this nightmare of a ghost with a mouth like a burning torch. The ghost is missing an arm, and I’m missing an arm too. The ghost is pure raging, and after me, chasing me up a never-ending flight of twisting stairs,” Raccoon Head lamented, his eyes bloodshot, one eye looking far bigger than the other.

Fat Elvis belched loudly after sipping from his coke, spoke up, “I’m thinking of doing a runner and ditching this place. I got an offer from a training center in Vietnam. I’ve not had a good night’s sleep since I got here. And everything in my apartment keeps getting coated in this grayish dust, no matter how much it’s cleaned. And yesterday morning, I coughed up blood.”

Raccoon Head looked off, made a hand gesture to someone off in the distance, then returned his gaze to us and spoke in a hushed voice, “I’m starting to believe this shite. I’d like to find a local witch doctor, bring in a medium, or something like that, and find out what the ghosts are after. But none of the Chinese teachers will really talk to me. They are terribly, terribly rude here. My last school, in Dali, they’d invite us out for dinner, KTV. Here, they give me the evil eye, look at me as if I just farted.”

Fat Elvis nodded in unspoken agreement.

It might have been that the two of them looked like pedophiles, why none of the locals would talk to them, but I kept this to myself. I’d also noticed many of the locals to be gruff, uncommunicative, taciturn, but I’d not gotten too much evil eye. Maybe that was because I ironed my clothes, wore slacks, collared shirts to my classes, didn’t dress in Lamb of God t-shirts or stained beer logo shirts like Raccoon Head or Fat Elvis.

I excused myself, got up to take my leave, head off to class. Raccoon Head did have a point, though. I needed to keep learning more about the ghosts, understand them, see if there’s a message to be deciphered. Maybe then we could do something about them... No longer be suppliant...



十三

I'd been friendly with Jim, the teacher who'd told me of the school's history. He'd only mentioned it in passing, as we played basketball. I figured I should talk more with him. See what I could find out.

Jim was a teacher who'd lived in America for a number of years, played college basketball there, then played pro ball in Australia. He spoke perfect English, with only the slightest trace of an accent. A soft-spoken, abnormally tall guy, he towered above most everyone, at 6'6, and had a strangely-sloped Christina Ricci sized forehead, cropped hair and thin black eyes; one of the eyes was sleeping, didn't line up correctly with the other.

Jim, a local, was originally from nearby the school. He was a nice fellow too. I'd played basketball with him several times. You could see him out balling every day on the basketball courts near the teachers' cafeteria.

I decided to approach him after a game of hoops, ask him about the school's past.

But I found he was reticent to talk, go into much detail, as it certainly isn't the best-selling point for the school.

After a bit of prodding, on the walk back to our building, he agreed to talk, speak to me over dinner...

We met on a chilly evening, in the far corner of the cafeteria, over a plate of steaming hot pork dumplings and ice-cold bottles of Sprite. He looked around nervously as he talked and spoke in a quiet voice, only mouthing certain words.

He said the school paid to have most of the history of the area wiped off the internet, though a few things would inevitably pop up in a deep dive, like they usually do with the Great Firewall, which made me think of Bill Clinton having once said something to the effect of China's internet censorship efforts being like trying to pin a glob of Jell-O to a wall using a hammer and nails...

Jim said he'd seen the prison from afar, as a child, riding on his bicycle, and more personally, he'd heard firsthand stories about it, from his uncle, a retired prison guard, who'd worked there for a time.

Jim sighed, stared at his dumplings as he talked and told me, "My uncle was there. He saw tons of executions. He said that at first the executions didn't bother him, because they involved criminals. He saw the criminals as cockroaches, my uncle said, like, big human insects, parasites, stains on humanity. He never pulled the trigger, but he helped walk them to the grounds, tied up a few of them, their arms behind their backs, in special knots that prohibited movement.

"The only execution that bothered him was that of a guy he knew. A former classmate in middle school. They weren't close; they were more acquaintances than friends. The guy was a poor farmer, and a decent man. He was never in trouble. The farmer was on death row because he was convicted of killing a businesswoman, a woman he didn't even know...

"It was widely believed the real killer was the woman's husband, who was a terrible deadbeat, a wifebeater and violent drunk; there was scant evidence against this poor farmer. And my uncle heard firsthand whispers that the drunk used his wife's cash to bribe the cops.

"There was talk too, the farmer might have been paid to take the fall for the wifebeater, but then got cold feet, and it was too late.

Pausing, Jim drew a deep breath, looked up towards the ceiling, grew pale, like he'd just seen the farmer's corpse.

"That one, the day of the execution, that haunted my uncle...

"My uncle said he has flashbacks to that morning, that the morning sky had this color of milk, and he'd see the farmer's bloodshot, tortured eyes, the expression of horror on his red face, his classmate's crying, flailing, and pleading as they had to, literally, drag him out of the jail, like an animal, and pull him, kicking and screaming, to the grounds, two guards holding up his twisting body, for the ... Ah, the poor guy, he was so upset, so afraid to die.

"My uncle retired early, after that. He said he still can't watch action movies or violent TV shows.

"So, it is true, many were killed in this place. Where the school is, that's where the prison stood.

"About where the soccer field and track, the jungle gym, that playground area for the kids, that's where the execution grounds were.

"All those kids out there running on the same spot where... Well, you know..."

Jim paused, shook his head, took a swig of his Sprite, and went on.

"There's a brand new, more high-tech prison around 50 kilometers from here. My uncle said they're still using rifles to execute prisoners, however, only the violent offenders. They've been conducting more executions by lethal injection these days, though that's usually for businessmen convicted of graft or the drug dealers.

"It's fitting they'd take out the drug dealers that way, by lethal injection...

"There's a 'death van', where they conduct the lethal injections. It rides around, to the prisons, the death van. In the van, it's equipped with a gurney, needles, poisons. They bring the prisoners in there, stick them and juice them up, then, if he's in good health, they'll surgically remove a kidney or two, eyes, gums, a lung or a liver, place the organs in ice boxes, hand them off to the carrier, who takes the organs to the hospitals.

"The van can accommodate one put down by rifle, too. They'll wheel them in on a gurney for the surgery.

“After the surgery’s finished, then another team comes, removes the body, brings the body out to another vehicle, drives the body out to the crematorium.”

“So, is it true? That you can, uh, like, just buy an organ?” I cut in and asked, wincing and contorting my face as I spoke.

Jim shifted in his seat, like he had hemorrhoids. He was visibly uncomfortable. He glanced around the room again, and he focused his attention back on me, and whispered, “I’ll say this. My aunt’s friend bought a kidney from an executed prisoner. I think it was around \$15,000.

“And, honestly, I don’t think I have a problem with that. It’s better the organ goes to someone who needs it.

“I know a lot of people in America or Australia might think it’s terrible. But look at it from our point of view. We’ve got a billion people. How do you take care of a billion people? That murderer, whose kidney is now my aunt’s friend’s, that prisoner redeemed himself, in a way, with the donation.”

I swallowed the dumpling I was eating. I’d dipped a little too much hot sauce on it, had to swig an extra gulp of Sprite, swish it around my mouth for a second. Then I asked Jim if he’d ever seen ghosts around the school. He guffawed and spoke up, truculently.

“Ghosts? Superstitions? No way! I don’t believe in that hogwash. That stuff is for Westerners, old people, backwards people in Southeast Asia, and stupid movies. Anyone under 40 these days in China only believes in science. And me too, I only believe in science. I believe in myself...”

I respected his convictions, his beliefs. But I knew what I’d seen. And knowing for sure all the negative energy that this location had manifested, I was uneasy, felt a burn in my throat and a knot in my stomach that was more than the chilis...

十四

I went back to my apartment, swallowed a handful of Xanax. I had been upping my dose weekly for them to be efficacious. While I waited for them to kick in, I lay

back in bed, scooped my phone up into my hands, stared down at it like a palm reader and read and explored more about the death penalty in China.

China doesn't release official statistics regarding the number of death sentences that are carried out, so it's hard to know how many were executed per year. Being an American, I like to know death tolls, helps me to put things in perspective, I think...

I opened my laptop, found it was already on and online, and playing a news report from an Australian TV channel. The report said there's over 2000 executions per year in China and that the State will carry out the execution in 2 or 3 years, offering the convicted only one appeal. Sometimes the execution will be done faster if it's a particularly heinous, famous case, and like Jim was saying, they usually carry out the death penalty by firing squad, but many are also done these days by lethal injection.

I heard a voice, a female voice, speak to me from the distance. It was speaking in Chinese, but I understood its words in English; it said, "The soldiers shoot them in the head and then send their family a bill for the bullet. It's called the 'Bullet Fee,' and ranges anywhere from 5 cents to \$4."

I looked around, but no one was there. I looked back to my laptop, found it was on an article about a young woman who'd been executed here, back in 1993. It was that jaw-droppingly beautiful woman, the murderess, I'd seen an article about before.

The voice spoke again, sending chills down my spine.

"In the People's Republic of China, shooting as a method of execution takes two typical formats, either a pistol shot in the back of the head or neck or a shot by a rifle in either the back or the back of the head from behind..."

"Officials won't let the relatives see the body. The officials only send the family the ashes, and only after they've paid the 'Bullet Fee.'"

Jarring to my feet, barbs of fear ran through me, and I stood atop the bed and scanned around the room. A figure in the corner of the room, a silhouette of a young girl vanished into the darkness.

My eyes heavy, a rush of vertigo overtook me, exorcized my fear. Everything in the room appeared as if in a fuzzy grayish cast, a dream within a dream. I plopped back down, languorously. My head felt like it weighed 100 tons. I rested into the soft pillows, felt as if I were floating in a warm ocean. I yawned in repose, a bag of wet bones, and I sank, drifted downwards.



十五

“How about an app for buying a ghost?” Man-bun Matty asked the table. His hands were raw, red with scabs and rashes, but he was in good spirits, hyper this morning, decked out in a golden traditional Chinese button up shirt and matching baggy gold pants and open toe sandals. He obviously had no fear of the cold.

Man-bun was sipping on a thermos of civet coffee, this special coffee produced by civets, the animals responsible for the original SARS in 2003...

I’d never seen it before, anywhere, the coffee, until I got to China... The stuff was made through a process where coffee beans would be fed to civets, would then be plucked from the animals’ shit and manufactured into coffee. While it sounded horrendous, I’d tried a sip, on a dare, and was smitten. It was a favorite of all the

foreign teachers, including myself, the coffee having an especially pungent, unique taste and strong caffeine kick...

Man-bun sat scrolling on his phone, tapping his foot. His teeth looked rotten and dirty, as if he hadn't flossed in a while. Or ever.

Raccoon Head didn't appreciate Man-bun's question about buying ghosts on apps and heatedly shot back, "But could you really 'buy' a ghost? Own it? Isn't that a form of supernatural slavery?"

"In Laos, they sell protective spirits," Man-bun said, didactically, "a ghost that will keep you safe, bring you good luck. The more powerful the spirit, the higher the price. I was with a bird whose aunt knows a monk who deals in them. But I don't think there's an app for it. Laos is more of a developing country."

"The Laotians are Commies too, right? Do they allow that?" asked Fat Elvis, dark black bags hanging under his eyes. Today he stunk strongly of liquor.

Man-bun snorted and giggled, "You see, they're different sorts of Commies. Them and the Vietnamese. They're kinder, gentler Communists. They're not as overbearing as the Chi-Coms."

Marcoba coughed wildly, then caught his breath. For a second, I thought he was choking, that someone would have to do the Heimlich, and I didn't know how to, nor did I think anyone else here knew first-aid.

Today Marcoba's face was sticky with sweat, his lips were chapped, and his eyes were terribly bloodshot. He was wearing a bright orange, dashiki type of shirt, matching genie pants, combat boots and an enormous necklace made entirely of white bird feathers, like a boa.

Man-bun pursed his lips, raised an eyebrow at Marcoba.

Marcoba sneered at Man-bun, the skin of his face constricted, and, voice rattling, he said, "One reason for the overabundance of ghosts is that the Communist Party destroyed the local temples, shrines and altars dedicated to ancestor worship and spirits. The temples were for placating, feeding the hungriest of ghosts."

“The Party prohibited fireworks. The fireworks were for the ghosts! The Party even abolished the Ghost Festival holiday, dog. They BANNED it... They let the ghosts loose, they antagonized them, and the spirits are running wild, like feral animals.”

Marcoba cleared his throat, and then stood up, said something in Spanish and stomped off, chanting in bizarre rhythms.

Leaving the cafeteria, several Chinese teachers said hello, smiled and waved to him. The teachers and students today were all dressed in PLA military uniforms. It must have been a military holiday, but the foreign teachers weren't told about it.

“They love Marco, don't they,” Fat Elvis said, contemptuously, “just look how all the teachers smile, wave to him.”

“Ah, mate, it was like that with all foreigners, until a few years ago,” lamented Man-bun, “used to be you couldn't walk down the street without people wanting to snap a photo with you, practice their English and chat or even just wave and say ‘hello’ and smile at you. Nowadays, most Chinese either ignore us, or look at us like shit on the bottom of their shoe.”

“Marco, then? Is it the Cuban, Communist connection thing? Crickey, the bloke's family fled the Cuban Commies, sailed to Florida on a raft through shark infested waters. Now here he is in China. I reckon that must be why he's so into the Santeria. He has to atone to his ancestors somehow. But the bloody Chinese sure do love him, for whatever reason,” said Raccoon Head, who then slugged down a swig of baijiu from a flask. His eyes looked like they were full of liquid.

Man-bun wagged his finger, interjected, “No, no, you don't understand. He's the perfect foreigner. His place of origin is Communist. Plus, he's not white, so he's not seen as an American Imperialist or an Opium War asshole, a conqueror, or a colonizer cunt. But then he's not black, so the locals don't view him as a criminal or a rapist. You must have learned by now that the only black people the Chinese tend to like are the NBA basketball players.

“It's shite. None of my schools in China have hired black teachers, no matter how qualified they were.

“The only black people they like are the black people they can control on their TV or electronic devices... But, mate, him, he’s tall, athletic, handsome, and his skin’s the perfect shade of foreigner. He’s the only foreigner really welcome here, these days, aside from the rich investors or famous athletes, Lebron James or Steph Curry, or the celebrities who play footsie with the CCP.”

“He’s a beneficiary of Cuba’s miscegenation and sociopolitical leanings...” I chimed in, and the others just stared at me silently for a few seconds.

“How do you know they really like him? The whole country cries wolf. They lie so much, it’s hard to know when they’re telling the truth,” posited Raccoon Head, his face contorting into a scowl.

“They let him wear those robes and dashikis to class,” said Fat Elvis, who I noticed was breaking out in terrible acne on his neck.

“I don’t see how his attire vitiates his lectures. I would estimate that it only enhances the foreign teacher experience,” I replied. Fat Elvis and the rest again only stared blankly at me. I was sensing a pattern...

I took my leave and pondered the idea that conflicts and backstabbing between foreign teachers was common at international schools. With all these different people, different countries and cultures represented, thrown into this fishbowl, it was inevitable.

We’d see each other every day, in the morning, afternoon, evening, weekends. There was no avoiding your coworkers, no escape, no way to not bump into them somewhere.

Especially, too, since we couldn’t go out much to the city, since China had restricted movement, the places foreigners could go and stay, since the pandemic and even after. The rules that everyone had expected to be loosened up once the virus had subsided, they had in fact, remained, and some were even more stringent.

Foreigners were required to register any address, with the local police, that we stayed at for more than 24 hours. We were made to show ID, undergo facial recognition checks, scan QR codes pretty much anywhere we went, and, despite

these measures, still there were times we'd be refused entry to places, for no reason, simply told "no why." It got quite tiring...

Shanghai, wasn't so bad, but the smaller cities, like the one we were near, were difficult to navigate, travel in. There were constant police checks, questionings, passport inspections, random drug tests too. It'd gotten so bad that most of us foreigners simply stayed inside the campus grounds. In a way, the place was still a prison.



十六

Another fellow teacher, Tony, lived a few doors down from me. He rarely ate with us but would pop into the cafeteria here and there for coffee or fried dumplings.

Tony was another ninja, like the Tasmanian, who'd been in China over a decade, and was also a teacher you wouldn't see much of anywhere, aside from his classes. I saw him more than others because I lived near him, and we'd struck up a few conversations in the hallway, became fast friends.

He was around two decades older than me, pale as flour and gaunt. His face sort of looked like Skeletor from the old He-Man cartoons. Or like a zombie. Like he'd just jumped out of a coffin.

He was cantankerous and pretty far right, Tony, on the political spectrum, while I'm more in the center, and I didn't share many of his beliefs, such as the kooky conspiracy crap he'd spout. But since there weren't that many other foreign teachers at the school, and since he lived so close to me, we sort of had to be friends.

Living in such close confines, if we weren't friendly, at least on a surface level, it would have gotten awkward quickly.

At least he read books, which is a rarity in this day and age. I appreciated that about him. He was a thinker and one of the few teachers I'd met who could carry on a conversation, wasn't halfway autistic, too weird, too alcoholic, or a pedophile... Or all those things...

He also shared my affinity for exercise, walking, and we went out walking around the track for evening exercise, about 2 or 3 nights per week.

(Something about Tony I'd noticed, though, which was odd, was how afraid animals were of him. How birds would caw and fly away as he neared and feral cats would run in terror at the mere sight of him. Perhaps he bore a resemblance to another foreign teacher I'd heard of, one who'd run around campus, chasing wildly after the campus's feral cats...)

Stepping foot on the track, I'd begun our walk by telling him more of the area's background I'd learned, and our topic of conversation had soon veered to the pros and cons of the death penalty. The irony of discussing the ethics of the death penalty on the grounds where they'd shoot prisoners wasn't lost on me.

To my surprise, Tony was more happy than shocked or dismayed as I rattled off what I'd learned of the place's background. His eyes lit up and he perked up and smiled as I spoke.

I told him, bluntly, "I don't believe in the death penalty. So the State is saying killing people is wrong, then the same bunch of people kill the person who killed. Murderers killing murderers if you ask me, way too eye for an eye, Old Testament...

"It'd be better to have them do hard labor for life. Or even to scrub toilets, wipe the asses of invalids, mop up puke, scrape gum off the sidewalks, take customer

service phone calls, do all the most horrible things, you know. That'd be a real deterrent."

He wasn't convinced. Flattened his lips. Shook his head. He answered back, in his glissando, nasal voice, his Boston accent strong, "But then you gotta house them, feed them, and the taxpayer is on the hook."

"Not if you get value from them," I replied, "and if they're scrubbing toilets, wiping asses, fighting forest fires, all that, they're creating value. Simply warehousing them in jails is wasteful and murdering them is plain unethical."

"What if the bastards refuse?" he asked, his voice rising, "what if they won't do the work? Then you shoot them? Then we're back to square one."

I nearly yelled at him, "No! You don't shoot them. You do something else. You make their life so unpleasurable that they beg to mop up puke, take customer service phone calls."

"What's with the customer service phone calls?" he asked, curling his upper lip, and thinning his eyes at me.

"Have you ever called a company, pissed off about your phone bill or whatever, sat on hold for 30 minutes, then screamed your head off when you finally got through to a person?"

"Of course. Who hasn't?"

"Imagine being the poor soul on the other end of the line, getting screamed at. And taking 200 of those sorts of calls in a row. It's like being a public toilet, taking customer service phone calls, working in a call center, everyone just coming in, pissing and shitting on you..."

He raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders. Somehow, I'm not sure customer service phone calls would bother him as much as it did me, when I did that job, part-time, many years ago, as a struggling college student.

"Back to the jail thing," he went on, after taking a prolonged, not so subtle stare at a female Chinese teacher's rear, "yanno, I heard about this rapist in Texas, who was robbing young dudes, then raping them up the ass, and they caught him, sent him to jail for 99 years. They sent him to jail, JAIL. For raping dudes. It sounds

more to me like they were doing him a favor. Now he can rape dudes for 99 years. Being in prison is probably like heaven to him, an ass-rapist's version of Disneyland.

"Not me, sir, no, no, no. I know sodomy is a deterrent for me. It's always made me think twice about doing illegal stuff, having to be raped in jail. I can fight but I'm way too skinny to fight off 5 or 6 musclebound rapists...

"Look, jail should be terrible. People should be raped and killed there. That way people don't want to commit crimes. They're too scared to commit crimes.

"That's why the Chinese are more law-abiding. They know how jail is. And Chinese jails are wicked horrible too, wretched, like 20 guys in one room, sleeping on a concrete floor, next to a dirty, stinky squat toilet.

"In most Chinese prisons, there's no heat, no AC, only one cold water tap for 20 people. There's cockroaches and rats crawling everywhere. And they keep the lights on 24/7, force the prisoners to work hard labor all day and at night they gotta sit still and watch Chinese TV propaganda. It's Hell."

I paused and shuddered at the thought of jail in China or in any third world country. Third world jails are probably the closest thing to Hell on Earth, and I'm sure the Chinese jails aren't even as horrific as countries further down the Human Development Index...

"But, Tony, what I don't understand is how anyone who calls themselves a Christian could be a proponent of the death penalty." My eyebrows furrowed, I went on, speaking forcefully, "It's an anathema, a gross contradiction to the Bible and to the teachings of Jesus."

Tony just shook his head and grinned, coolly, "I think it's been too long since you've read the Bible if you think Christians can't kill. Maybe you forgot about the Crusades, too.

"It's His work, His plan. He's got our numbers. He's got our data stored. Google ain't got nothing on God, man.

"God giveth and taketh, Kim. It all happens for a reason. And I'm more on the taketh side, to be frank. I'm more of a vengeful God, spiteful Jesus type of

Christian myself. And look, the Bible is like the Constitution, it's open to interpretation.

"As for me, I interpret it like this, that some people are just shit. They're irredeemable. That's why there's the death penalty. That's why there's Hell. There's a Hell for a reason. We have to remove the scum, the dregs, get rid of them. Or else they'll kill again if given the chance. Look at some of the criminals we have in America. Like the mafia, fuck the mafia. They extorted my old man's business for tens of thousands of bucks, bled him for years. Fuck John Gotti. Fuck Sammy 'The Bull' Gravano. Fuck Al Capone. Fuck Tony Soprano. Fuck The Westies, fuck them all.

"They made for great movies, sure, but, in real life, there's nothing cute or funny about any of them.

"Fuck the gangbangers too. And fuck the mass shooters. Like James Holmes, the Batman shooter asshole. Why is he alive? He eats and sleeps for free at the taxpayers' expense. At least most of the other mass shooters, like those Columbine pricks, did us a favor and shot themselves."

Tony stopped to hack up another wad of spit at the far edge of the bright red track, then hurried his pace, walking in long strides, at a rapid clip.

I picked up my speed to match his and averred, "James Holmes is in a tiny cell for the rest of his life, sleeping next to his toilet. Living the rest of your life in a bathroom is a terrible fate, but still not enough of a punishment, particularly for him. Get value from him. Have him doing hard labor. But if he's too weak for that, make him take customer service phone calls. For people pissed off at Netflix. Make him do something. Something terrible." I posited and looked over the same Chinese teacher Tony had scoped as she passed by, powerwalking, her black spandex pants hugging her full hips nicely. She was not bad.

Tony snuck another glance at the teacher's protuberant wiggling rear and said, "Nope. Jab a machine gun up James Holmes's ass and pull the trigger. Or shoot him in his face. Oh, even better, put him in a cell with the Texas male rapist. Then shoot them both."

"Nah," I disagreed, "put James Holmes in a Chinese jail. Make him watch Chinese propaganda shows and eat cockroaches."

“Nah, hand me a gun, hire me for the firing squad. I’ll save the taxpayers a bundle,” Tony said, before he stopped in his tracks, stepped aside for a breather, wheezed and coughed, then spat out another hefty gob of spit.

Then he looked around to see if anyone was close to us. He’d do this before he said particularly offensive things, things that were bad even for him. I guess it was his way of issuing a trigger warning...

It really was fortunate we didn’t have any politically correct, social justice warrior type people... I couldn’t see many of those sticking around for too long in China, anyway, and Mao have mercy, they certainly wouldn’t appreciate Tony...

When I saw Tony’s head panning around, like a radar, saw him smooth his jet-black slicked back hair, saw the fire in his eyes, oh yeah, I knew something awful was coming. And it did. Tony, started speaking, and behind him, around him, I saw energy, white flashes, and further off in the oily night’s horizon were figures of men with shaved heads, kneeling... A row of them... Like they were in a mosque ready to pray...

The white flashes and traces of men in the distance disappeared as he exhaled deeply, readying to speak. He didn’t look like he’d seen anything, though, and spoke in a happy-go-lucky voice.

“I don’t know, Kim. I’m a Christian, a Catholic, but I kinda liked George Carlin, the cranky old fart. I also kinda like it when a lot of people die. As long as it’s not anyone I know or care about.

“But where I differ from Carlin is that I think it’s God’s Plan. God does it to remind us of our place. Of the value of time.

“Plus, there’s too many people in the world. China has certainly reinforced that notion. It’s an environmental disaster, this place, all these fucking people. That’s why they’re having these plagues, famines, floods, wars throughout their history... And nowadays it’s the air, the cigarettes, the people falling from high-rise buildings, debris from high-rise buildings landing on people below, or the buildings themselves collapsing...

“And if that doesn’t get you, you’ve got fake medicine, fake vaccine, fake alcohol, poisonous food, and if you survive that, you got the mass stabbers, kindergarten

killers, public bus arsonists, car accidents, train crashes and buses driving off bridges. God is cleaning them out. Mopping up the Earth, like he does to us all.

“It’s not only God’s way of population control, but, admit it, accidents, disasters and murders make for good TV and movies... As much as I hate James Holmes, shooting up a movie theater is, albeit grimly, perfect. It was a classic case of cause and effect. Life imitating art. It was performance art, in a way, yanno.

“Mass shooters, murders, tornadoes, war, terrorists, natural disasters, tobacco companies, shit, even the coronavirus, provide a service to the planet. Entertainment. Fear. Commerce. But, most importantly, it’s population control. It’s all from God. It is His plan. He is at the controls.

“So, I tell you, Kim, these people, these stinking bastards, these criminals, the executed, they served their purpose. They served God. And they served us.

“They brought the population down and entertained us, and they themselves were killed. It’s a win, win...”

I asked him if he believed in ghosts or had seen any, had any nightmares. He hadn’t seemed affected like the other teachers.

“I haven’t seen shit. I haven’t had nightmares. Maybe the ghosts keep away from me for a reason. I don’t blame them, I know Jujitsu. I’d fucking choke out a bitch ass ghost... Plus, I pray every night. I keep a crucifix in every room. I got Jesus on my side. I know He is with me...

“I think you’re imagining things, Kim, I really do. Ghosts are ideas. Our ideas. Ideas of ourselves. I don’t know if ghosts exist as sentient beings, if that’s real or possible...

“But, I tell you, I do believe in energy. Energy that is created cannot be destroyed. There might be paranormal energy, a force left behind. But it doesn’t affect me. As far as I’m concerned, most of the criminals killed here were atheists, so they’re probably in Hell. They didn’t accept Jesus. The only ghost I truly believe in is the Holy Ghost.

“Like I said, yanno, it’s a win-win, their deaths... Listen, I’m getting winded. Let’s go back. The smog is picking up. It’s suppose’ ta be gnarly tonight... It’s already getting smoggy as shit. Fucking looking like God’s up there chain smoking.”

Again, I heard the voice, the female voice from before, and it whispered into my ear, “win, win.”

My spine tingled, and I felt a lump in my throat. I looked around, for a split second, and saw a hovering face of one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen. I knew it from somewhere. But where? Before I could recall, the face dissolved into a swarm of gnats that buzzed up and dispersed and fragmented into the starless night...

There was indeed a heavy smog rolling in, or maybe a fog. In China, it was hard to tell which. Visibility was limited, but again, as we left the track, I could see trace visions, figures of dead men being hauled off on stretchers by prison guards, and soldiers in uniform, carrying guns, their figures melting into the distance, forming into the fog.



十七

I’d taken my pills but still I lay awake at night, staring at shadows. I peered out my open window and realized I’d not seen any stars, or the moon, since I’d arrived in China. I could imagine the school’s ghosts as gremlins crawling and clawing up into the sky, eating the moon like a cake.

Tonight, there were no drilling sounds and my room was silent as death and my mind was racing, abuzz, unable to quiet... I was feeling like an overloaded plane in a turbulent sky, wishing that I'd plummet, crash into sleep.

Our building sat on the same area as the prison. I was levitating over their cells, levitating over their graveyard. I was thinking of the men, crammed into the dingy rooms, imagining the torture they'd endured. The convicts in chains, counting the hours until they were brought out to the guns. Mosquitoes feasting on their flesh. I sensed a vestigial energy, spirits in the air.

Tired of staring at the air, mind in void, I rolled over in bed, pawed at my bedside table, grabbed my phone and cradled it in my hands and its blue light cut through the blackness of the room.

I surfed the net and noticed an email from the school. It was a stern warning to all teachers and staff not to throw debris of any sort from our windows or balconies after an elderly man, a Chinese teacher's father, was seriously injured by a dog that'd been thrown off an upper-storey balcony of a campus apartment building... There was no word on the dog's condition.

I was beginning to understand more why many of the long-term China expats I'd met were such nihilists... Something of angry ghosts themselves...

I looked more into past Chinese death penalty cases at the prison that was here. After a deep dive into Baidu, I found two more notable ones.

They were both striking. The first one was of a pudgy girl, a young girl, who'd helped her boyfriend sell meth, and was convicted, sentenced to die.

There was a series of pictures of her, and I was shook by her youthful exuberance, a charisma she exuded that leapt off my phone's small square screen.

The series of photos showed the girl smiling, eating dumplings with her jailers in the hours before she was to be executed, then the same jailers bringing her out to the execution grounds, and the girl in tears as she was being brought to her death.

Seeing her face, sweet as a birthday cake, her cherubic, blushing cheeks, I could feel the anguish, the thumping of her heart.

I hoped her spirit was at peace.

The next story I read was of a scrawny young guy with a bowl haircut, big glasses, and buckteeth. Only around 20 or so, he was an unemployed loner who'd lived with his parents.

He'd been tormented as a child and later, as a young adult, sought vengeance on his middle school, where he'd been bullied.

In the article, the young man claimed that he'd been visited by a demon from a video game he'd played, a demon in a dragon robe, with a long beard and high-brimmed hat.

The demon had handed him a knife with a gold-seal and told him to slay the schoolchildren, that the children's souls would go to Hell, where the demon and the young man could torture, torment and punish them forever.

The young guy believed in the dream, and had gone over to the school, to the school's front gates, with a knife, and when the school let the kids out, he went on a killing spree, ran amok, and stabbed over 10 young girls to death, seriously wounded 4 others.

After the stabbing spree, he'd dashed off and snuck into an internet café nearby, was found hours later, playing the video game on a computer, his hands and clothes stained with blood.

The young man was executed, and the video game banned in China.

It struck me that he'd gotten away with killing so many in a public place. Wouldn't someone have stopped him? And how did he manage, soaked in blood, to sneak into an internet café?

A voice spoke to me from the dark. The soft female voice again. It was sweet as honey, the voice, but its words bit.

"In China, they stand. They watch. The bystanders don't usually get involved. They watched the girls get murdered. Are they as guilty as the killer? Do you think?"

I dropped my phone, bounced up in bed, scanned around the room, yelled, "Who's there?"

The voice disappeared. I looked back down at my phone. The page had changed. It was now on a Baidu news story about another execution. Looking at the mugshot under the headline, I knew the face; I knew the person. It was the stunningly beautiful girl I'd read of before, executed here back in 1993.

It was her! She was the ghost I'd been seeing!

I picked up the phone, read the story. It was a more in-depth article than the one I'd read before...

The article explored her upbringing, said she'd had a tough life. Her parents were janitors and were strict, tough on her, forced her to study for hours on end. Her alcoholic father ruthlessly beat her when she got anything less than perfect grades.

She'd done well in school and made it to a top university in the province. But her good fortune ended there. She'd had a boyfriend in college who pushed her to sleep with him, then dumped her because he said she was "impure" for sleeping with him and later forced her, at knifepoint, to go have an abortion.

Then she'd allegedly been raped by her boss at a mining company where she worked as a secretary after college.

Then the boss's daughter pressured the girl, under a thinly veiled threat of being fired, to have a sexual relationship with a county tax inspector. The inspector had demanded extortionate bribes and threatened to expose the company's tax evasion, fiscal malfeasance.

After being coerced into spending the night with the inspector, the girl snapped.

The next evening, when the inspector, the boss, the boss's wife, son and daughter, as well as three other workers from the company were having dinner in the company's upstairs lounge, the girl rode her motorbike to the company's office, smashed open a back window, poured gasoline into the building and rode off as the trail of flames licked its way to a dozen freshly-delivered cooking gas canisters sitting in the hallway and the building exploded in a loud fiery boom. Everyone inside died, including a security guard who'd been asleep at his desk.

The girl had been caught on a security camera starting the fire. She was guilty beyond a doubt.

Along with her looks catching the public's eye, the case itself was so gruesome and shocking on all levels that it garnered much media coverage.

She did nothing to fight or dispute the charges, neither claiming innocence nor pleading guilty. It took only an hour for her to be convicted by the three-judge panel; a year after that, she lost her automatic appeal and days later, she was sent to the firing squad.

The company she worked at was only 20 kilometers from the school. And she'd been executed here, where the school's soccer field sits.

Looking at her picture, it was hard to believe she'd committed such a crime. Her face was beautiful, I mean, really beautiful, like hideously beautiful; when I gazed at her face it was like the picture was made of knives, carving her image into my mind.

Staring at her photo, I awed at how pale she was; she was pale as a kabuki dancer, and had such delicate features, her round face with such big brown eyes and full, bell-shaped lips, and the cutest little pert button nose. Her straight, raven black, shiny hair was parted to the right and hung down to her thin, hourglass waist. She was so thin, petite, and fragile looking, so innocent looking, like a children's doll.

I couldn't see rage in her eyes. I couldn't even see there being malice, rage in her. But, curiously, I also couldn't see even a trace of sadness.

It was as if she was there but not there, a portmanteau of beauty and absence.

Scrolling down, I saw another picture of her, taken minutes before she was to be shot, and she wore casual clothes, a cotton white blouse, and blue jeans. Only 24, with her face soft as snow, she had the appearance of a young goddess. And, again, she seemed so stoic.

She'd been bent to her knees for the camera. And behind her was a handwritten poster, affixed to a wooden stake, saying her name and crime.

Shortly after the picture was taken, she was shot in the back of the head. The article stated that the soldier who shot her was said to be tormented. Haunted by what he'd done. He'd said she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

In the minutes before he shot her, as they marched to the field, the soldier said he'd gazed at her, saw her expression, her lips hanging open, her face in a look oscillating between sadness, terror, reluctance and bitter acceptance, and he said that he knew her meaning, the telling message in her eyes, and he knew exactly what she meant when she whispered to him, "fragrance vanishes and jade crumbles," before she knelt to accept death.

Three months later, her executioner killed himself, in his barracks, shooting himself in the mouth.

The company where she'd worked had gone out of business, and on the grounds where its building once stood, there'd been an apartment building to be constructed, but so many accidents kept occurring during its construction that the empty shell, the half-finished concrete shell of the building was abandoned.

The land considered to be cursed, the construction project has sat there, unfinished, moldering, for nearly 30 years...

I felt barbs of sadness, reading her story. She'd been wronged. Raped. Couldn't have been in her right mind. And who wouldn't have been enraged in her situation? And who could she have gone to? A local rich man like that in China, a tax inspector for the government, with their status, their connections, there'd have been little chance for her to pursue legal recourse. The whole thing was ugly and tragic from every angle...

My mind quit racing when the pills kicked in hard, and, drowsy, I wished to jump from the archipelago of insomnia, to dip into the warm sea of sleep, and I wiped my dry eyes with the back of my hand...

"Do you think I'm beautiful? I always wanted to have a foreign boyfriend," a presence whispered into my ear. The words were carried by a hot wind that warmed and tickled my neck. Then the room started to feel colder. I could see my breath.

Jolted, I jumped up out of bed. But I didn't see anyone around. On my phone, though, there was a video image. A moving one.

"Hello?" I said curiously, picking up the phone, and I glared down at it, apprehensively, my head cocked back, and my lips pursed.

It was her. The girl from the article.

“Ni hao...” said the beautiful face on my phone’s screen, “my name is Lily. It’s nice to meet you.”

I hadn’t opened any video app. There wasn’t any box around the image. It’d taken up the entire screen of my phone, the image. I was thinking I’d been hacked. But she sure didn’t look Russian, like I’d have expected.

I wasn’t sure how she’d hacked into my phone, but she had. And it definitely was her. I’d know that face anywhere. Her ghost was alive.

“I’m Kim,” I told her, in a syrupy voice to soothe myself, before sitting back into my bed, “Nice to meet you, Lily. How’d you get, um, my phone...”

“You’re silly. I’m everywhere. But I’m glad you found me. Not everyone believes,” she said, and behind her was a bright tunnel of light, the light brighter and whiter than any I’d seen, like thousands of flashbulbs. “Do you believe, Kim?” she squinted her eyes and asked, “Do you believe in ghosts? In me?”

“Sure, I do. I, I, uh, think, you’re utterly enchanting. And I want to know your story. Did you do it? Did you murder those people? I can’t believe you did. I don’t want to believe you did.”

I had to look away for a second after asking that. And I shifted my gaze towards my window and saw out to the lights of the nearby chemical plant, its golden and silver lights swimming and blinking through the mist of the cold gray night.

When I looked back at the phone, she didn’t hesitate in her reply. She nodded and blurted out, bluntly, “I did.”

All the air had left my lungs, like a balloon that’d been popped. I struggled for a second, gathered myself.

She giggled and shrugged her shoulders. Didn’t say a word, but her gesticulations were telling.

“Did you deserve it? Did you deserve to die?” I asked, drew in a deep breath. I worried I might hyperventilate, and it started to feel as if shards of broken glass were in my throat.

“I guess. But I’m not really dead, am I? In China, we believe a ghost isn’t dead. But it will die later. The second death is the final death. The real death. I’m still waiting for it.

“Did you, know, Kim, that death was a massive release? Did you know that death is the most incredible orgasm you’ll ever have? Don’t fear it...

“I’m here, Kim. I’m with you. When you opened your phone, you found me, right? I’m alive in images, in words, in people’s minds. When the last person speaks my name, when the files are gone, and I’m deleted, my last picture burned, then I’m dead. That’s the second death, the real death. Right?”

The phone went blank. Shut off. I thought I’d lost her. But she reappeared. Her silhouette next to me, forming into a translucent figure, a body, glowing, lying next to me in my bed.

She was nude; her slender body, its curves, its peaks, the cleft between her legs, illuminated, in a silver hue. She reached over, touched me, stroked my chest, cupped her hands on my cheeks. Her touch was warm, but her breath was ice cold. She raised her face to mine, puckered her bell-shaped lips, and we kissed, her icy tongue, like a spoonful of ice cream, touching tenderly at mine.

Only in a t-shirt and boxers, I broke our kiss and undressed, lay between her legs and inserted myself inside her. I thrust, pushed, swam in. I was a ghost inside myself, a warm corpse, and I pushed into her with the strength of ten men.

Her arms lay as a T on the bed, as if she’d been crucified, and she squirmed like an eel under me, panting and gibbering, and when I came, my body quaked, rocked and shook like a comet hitting the earth, and the room caught on fire, orange flames eating into us, and everything swirl-faded to black...

When I woke up, I was nude under a cocoon of warm blankets. My phone lay next to me, under the sheets, and was still on, but was displaying a spreadsheet, full of info, facts about the prison, notable convicts it’d housed.

I read over it for a few minutes, then got up, showered, dressed and went to meet Marcoba for breakfast before class. I was supposed to be at home this morning, grading papers, but I had to go cover a class for Raccoon Head, who’d been in the hospital with a severe case of food poisoning.



十八

Marcoba and I met in tacit silence at the front of the cafeteria. Today he was dressed in a full dinosaur costume, a T-Rex.

Chinese teachers gazed at him, with soft warm eyes, lips stretched into smiles, while they stared at me, curiously, some condescendingly. When we sat down to the laowai corner, began our breakfast, a shifty-eyed auntie, sitting nearby, motioned, laughed to her brethren, and mimicked me eating, simultaneously perplexed and amazed that I could use chopsticks.

Terrorist Reggie or Reggie The Terrorist, or simply “The Terrorist,” was joining us. Terrorist Reggie had coined his own moniker, after his experiences with racism in the States, “taking the words back,” he’d said. Terrorist Reggie, the 45ish Arab, the math teacher, the birdman with the big bald head and big hook nose and bulging eyes that almost leapt out of his head.

Buddha-bellied and bald and with long eyelashes and man tits, his semi-feminine features made the Terrorist look sort of like a pregnant woman with cancer.

The Terrorist always brought his own fork and knife to the cafeteria. Something about hygiene, he'd mumbled.

The Terrorist, carrying his metal tray of fruit and bread, hard-boiled eggs, walked over to meet us, tracing his footsteps on the floor as if he were walking a tightrope. He didn't look so hot. His face was pale as milk.

He sat down to the foreigner table, next to a pair of quiet, clean-cut young teachers. Chunky, and with androgynous features and haircuts, they looked like cult members. The weird Utah twosome had invited everyone to their apartment for cookies and Bible study...

The Terrorist nodded his hellos and then spoke in a soft, raspy voice, "Bro, I was having crazy dreams last night. I was trapped in a fire, in my classroom, and I couldn't get out. All my students... They were in prison uniforms, and the classroom was a factory. The students were burning, they were screaming and crying and whimpering. It was the most realistic dream I'd ever had," he paused, drew in a deep breath, exhaled, and went on, "I woke up screaming, drenched in sweat."

Chuck the Canuck, the walrus, was there, and he also looked of shit. He'd been listening intently, and then spoke up, which was rare for him. He was usually pretty taciturn, morose. His Toronto accent colored his vowels and gave his words punching power.

"I too had a nightmare. A satanic one. I was in a plane, and after liftoff, it began to descend, fast, plunging to the ground. Everyone on the plane was shrieking and bracing for impact. I looked out the window and saw the ground was becoming bigger and bigger. Then there was a crazed man, eh, cursing in Cantonese, running and splashing petrol down the aisle of the plane, flames following behind him. The cabin was filling with smoke. Then I awoke. I was also dripping sweat like I'd just stepped out of a sauna."

The pair looked to me, in anticipation of a similar nightmare, a tale of fire, death.

But I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to share my, uh, encounter with the ghost... Which I wasn't sure was a dream, hallucination, paranormal, or simply abnormal.

I did, however, horripilate, and then felt like ice water had been thrown at me when I suddenly recalled what I'd just read on the spreadsheet.

"Reg, you know why they closed the prison?" I asked. He just stared blankly at me, shrugged his shoulders.

"Because part of it was used as a factory, one part for producing Christmas lights, the other for making lighters. The side with the lighters caught fire, burned alive all the convicts in there; 50 people, at least, died..."

Reg grew a shade paler, listening to this, and appeared to lose his appetite, stopped picking at the fruit on his tray.

"Chuck," I said, shifting in my chair to face him, "there was an incident in Guangzhou, years ago, where a guy, a disgruntled airline worker, from here in Henan, boarded a plane, with a canister of gas, set fire to the aisle, shortly after takeoff, and the plane crashed, everyone on board died. He'd told his brother of his plans, over the phone, the night before, from a payphone outside a restaurant.

"Though his brother said he didn't believe it, thought it was just drunken ramblings. Still, the police charged him in the case, made an example of him for not telling, probably also to quell public anger, and, anyhow, he was put to death here..."

"You guys must be reading into the history of this place as much as me," I said, and slugged down a big gulp of red-hot SARS coffee. The coffee was strong, bitter, just as one would expect of something that came from an animal's ass.

Expecting both to fill me in on their research, the pair sat with wandering, hazy eyes, and parted lips. An uneasy silence ensued.

The Terrorist shook his head, said meekly, "No, I haven't been reading about it."

"Me neither," said Chuck, "and since I've been here, I've had night terrors, but none as vivid as last night."

Marcoba slammed his fist down on the table, rattling it, and cried out, "It's haunted, this place. The ghosts are speaking to us. Communicating through sleep. We're on their beds, we're walking in their graveyard. We're shitting over their

graves, our septic tanks buried in their cemetery... And their methods, the methods the ghosts are using to communicate, it's as if they wish to negotiate with guns pointed at our heads..."

His tone then softened, his eyes squinted, and his voice lowered to a whisper. Steam purred up from his collar.

"I'm going to sacrifice two live chickens tonight, one for you each, I'll say your names in my spell. Let me know if you want the blood. I've been drinking chicken blood mixed with rum. I've not had a haunting in my apartment yet," he said, clutching and kissing the silver crucifix that hung from his neck, before hurrying off, walking hastily out of the cafeteria.

Tony passed by him, and the two nodded hellos. As Tony approached, the cult members quickly excused themselves and left. They'd always avoided Tony, for whatever reason.

Tony, flashing a toothy, sinister grin, was in a far better mood than us, and he duckwalked, sat down to our table, cupping a hot coffee in his hands, humming the melody to Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days."

Tony wasn't much of a breakfast eater.

Tony asked, "What's good, gentlemen? What's the current topic of conversation?"

"Dreams..." replied The Terrorist, warily.

Tony's posture slackened. He sipped his coffee and muttered, "Dreams, hmmm," and fell silent, scratching his head, glancing around the room furtively. A few flakes of dandruff fell softly from his scalp, like tiny snowflakes.

"Did you have any disturbing dreams last night?" I asked, covering my mouth while I chewed on an apple slice.

"Well, actually, I did," he said, speaking in a low, scratchy voice, "I had a wacky, wild one... I was in the Cultural Revolution and was wearing a dunce cap and my students had used blinking Christmas lights to tie me to the podium in the front of the classroom. They were dancing circles around me, were throwing fruit and stationery at me, yelling stuff like 'rightist' and 'foreign trash,' and then I woke in

a cold sweat, but was fuh-reezing in my apartment. My throat's been killing me, too, the whole morning.

"Dammit, I'm thinking these nutty dreams are like a virus up in here, now maybe I'm catching it. Or not. I did watch a documentary about the Cultural Revolution, so that could explain it. I believe more in Freud than in ghosts."

Tony looked us over, noticed the grim mood and inquired, "What's with you fellas? Why the long faces? Casper, Freddy Krueger still after you bastards?"

A collective grunt amongst us could be heard. Tony's lips parted, his mouth opening, probably to hurl more insults, but I cut him off, politely as possible, and told him, "This place housed prisoners during the Cultural Revolution. There were teachers, college professors, intellectuals given the death penalty, sent here for 'counterrevolutionary' crimes, 'subverting state power' and 'treason' charges. Last night, we all saw things from the place's past. The ghosts are trying to talk to us, tell us something, but we don't know what."

I'd expected Tony to doubt the verity of my statement. But, instead, he bobbed his head in concurrence.

"Oh, if they're real, I bet you they want us gone. 'Specially us, the foreigners. The living certainly want us gone, just look around," he panned around the room, jutted his chin towards our Chinese coworkers, many of whom were staring at us, a few with the eyes of deer, but most with the eyes of tigers.

"They think we're snakes," he continued, "but I don't care. I don't care one iota what they think of me. To live in China, these days, 'specially, you can't have many feelings.

"Honestly, I hate China. I hate its people, how greedy, racist and vapid they are. Once you've met one, you've met about all of them.

"Yeah, yeah, I know, it's not their fault, they're brainwashed, programmed, yada yada, and a few are alright, 'specially the younger ones or really old ones, the dinosaurs, but, what the fuck, the spitting and hacking loogies everywhere, the pushing and shoving and line cutting in the subway. I mean, you gotta fight your way in and out of the subway. Bastards won't even let you out when the doors open, people all rushing in like escaped zoo animals.

“They even smoke in elevators. Who the fuck smokes in a damn elevator? They smoke everywhere. Look, there’s a chef over there smoking in the corner of the school cafeteria.”

Tony nodded his chin toward a near dwarf of a chef, a small middle-aged Chinese man in a pointy white hat. The chef had a face like a baseball glove and was standing in the corner of the cafeteria, puffing away, nonchalantly, on a cigarette. The chef noticed our attention and sneered at us.

Tony paused, pulled out a tissue from his pocket, coughed up a harsh wad of phlegm and spit into the tissue in his cupped hands, then balled the tissue up, and set it on the table. Then he continued his venting, the words pouring from his mouth like lava...

“The grannies letting their kids shit on the streets, right in front of public bathrooms. I once saw a 2-year-old being held up to shit over a garbage can, right in a grocery store, I mean, at least he didn’t shit on the floor, but still. What kind of fucking people? I can see how this place gave the world the coronavirus, the fucking lack of proper hygiene. There’s not even soap and hot water in the bathrooms.”

“They fancy drinking the hot water,” interjected a porky ginger, a freckle face middle-aged Brit sitting nearby, whose name I didn’t know, and whose dark circles under his eyes made him look like a red panda...

Tony grimaced and went on, “They could have really benefited from being colonized more. Just look at Shanghai compared to the rest of them...

“Or maybe if the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had lasted, taken over the country. If they were Christians. If they had God instead of Mao. If they had Jesus instead of just money. But no, sadly, not.

“That’s its whole history, though, China. Fucking China, it gets better, then there’s a new emperor who trashes it, or it goes to war, everyone starves, then it gets better, then, ack, fucking rinse and repeat... It sucks.

“Even reading blogs, books about China, ‘specially about or by Westerners in China, ‘An American Bum in China,’ videos on YouTube by C-Milk and Winston, crap like that, it’s not satisfying. It’s like eating fast food. Hell, everything about

China is like fast food. It looks great in the pictures, but when you get the real thing, it only disappoints...

"There's nothing satisfying about China. It only gives you a quick fix, but afterwards you feel sick, empty, disappointed, and angry.

"Except Peter Hessler, I gotta say. He's the only one who 'gets' it..."

He'd thrown up air quotes around the word "gets." Then took a sip of civet shit coffee, panned around the room venomously, and continued, "But overall, overall, it's shit, it's all shit. I hate it.

"I hate China. I only stay for the cash. There's no other reason to be here. There's no culture. If you want authentic Chinese culture, the 5000 years of history, all the cool shit, you go to Taiwan. They're the keepers of the flame, the Republic of China, not these Commie clowns. All the culture here was destroyed by Mao and his lackeys, the Red Guards... It's dead. This whole place is a bunch of ghosts.

"It's ghost cities. Ghost people. There's nothing here. 'Specially for us foreigners. I mean, what is there in China, for us? For foreigners? They don't really want us. You can't have citizenship. You only get a stupid temporary green card if you're a basketball player asshole like Stephon Marbury, or if you can grease the right palms.

"No one stays. Everyone leaves. Even the rich people, the rich Chinese, they leave too. Anyone smart leaves. Everyone hightails it out of this shithole.

"And why would you even want to put roots down here? You wanna get held hostage like those Canadians? Buy an over-priced concrete box of an apartment that crumbles or collapses in ten years? Not to mention you can only lease land from the fucking government. You can't own shit...

"It's a horrible, terrible place, a high-tech, dystopian shithole, and everything about it sucks, except the money, a handful of nice people, and the bullet trains, oh, and the dumplings. Now those, the dumplings, those, now THOSE are bitching."

"And the lack of political correctness," cut in a plump neckbeard, sitting at the end of the table, wearing a faded black Green Bay Packers hoodie, the

neckbeard's eyes popping wide as he spoke... I couldn't remember the neckbeard's name but always winched at his foul-smelling breath...

"Alright, yeah, the lack of PC bullshit, yeah, I'll give you that. But, like, still, altogether, fuck China. And fuck the ghosts. I don't give a fuck about the ghosts. If they're real, the ghosts, fuck them too.

"They're not scaring me off, the fucking Commies, or the fucking ghosts...

"I've only got another few years to work before I escape to the Philippines or Thailand or Cambodia, anyway, yanno...

"Shit, I hope the place is haunted. I hope it scares away other teachers from coming. I hope China starts another plague. I hope it keeps getting worse and more racist and xenophobic, scares more foreigners away. It keeps my job more secure. That young and handsome 23-year-old kid who can sing, dance, and play guitar, he'll go to Vietnam instead. Fucking Ryan Gosling looking ass motherfucker."

Tony chugged down his rat shit coffee. Bade farewell.

"Gentlemen," he said, raising to his feet and sauntering off to his class.

While he certainly was uncouth and cagey, the man did have a sense of equanimity to him if nothing else, remaining calm, stiff as a corpse, even when ranting. And at least he dressed well, I thought.

Unlike most of the school's teachers, Chinese included, who wore smart casual or even t-shirts, jeans, or sweatpants to class, Tony was in a three-piece-suit. Every workday. He'd been in Thailand before, he'd said, had picked up the habit, spoke of its importance, the "face" it gave, how much the Asians appreciated appearance. The advantage of dressing even smart casual.

The Terrorist, Walrus, Ginger, Neckbeard, nor I said a word after Tony left, just looked down at our phones. Suddenly I was hungry as a horse and scarfed down the remainder of my breakfast, in big heaping bites, then left for class.



十九

When I got to the classroom, it was cold as a sepulcher, and I saw that the students looked like skeletons, assortments of bones. I closed my eyes, rubbed them, but still, everyone in the lecture hall, all 50 students, were skeletons, moving, talking skeletons, skeletons holding phones, skeletons writing in notebooks, holding books.

I clung to the lectern, my palms clammy and hot, and I mechanically conducted my lecture on variations between Western cultures, trying my best to keep my focus on my laptop, my notes or on the back of the classroom, where a poster of Supreme Leader Xi Jinping hung on the wall. He was the only human in the room.

During the final couple minutes of the class, I shifted to the last slide of my PowerPoint and saw- her- on my laptop, her face, Lily, staring at me, smiling. I swung my head and looked to the projection screen hanging from the wall, thinking she'd be on it, but she wasn't. Then I looked out at the students, and all 50 were her. Identical. 50 Lils. Staring and smiling at me.

One Lily raised her hand, asked, "Is it true the Qing Dynasty soldiers exhumed Hong Xiuquan's body, beheaded it, burned it, then shot the ashes from a cannon so it'd have no eternal resting place? Do you think Deng Xiaoping did the same to Tankman or the other June 4th protestors?"

I swallowed and composed myself. It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It was not real.

None of these students knew the existence of the Tiananmen Massacre.

I returned my eyes to the lectern and kept them affixed to my school approved, scripted notes, read word for word from them. I ploddingly finished the lecture. Once the bell rang, two girls who sat in the front, and who were always together, came to ask me about an upcoming test.

When I looked up at them, I saw them back in their bodies, but they were as Siamese twins, attached at the hip, and completed each other's sentences. I rubbed my eyes again. My eyes had started to burn like they'd been washed with chemicals.

When I opened my eyes, the girls were as normal, smiling and joking, and as I answered their questions, my mouth felt toothless, empty; my lips were torpid. When the girls took their leave, one told me, laughing hyenically, that I looked fat and that I should exercise more.

How direct they are about that in China. Fat-shaming is not even a concept...



“Reactionary,” a stentorian voice bellowed at me the minute I walked into my apartment, and I saw there was a pile of letters strewn about my kitchen table.

The papers were yellowed with age. They were written in Chinese, in a smeared, dark red ink.

I sat down, looked them over. Used translation software on my phone to scan, translate them.

They were a prison diary, written by Lily.

The diaries were mundane, showed the tedium of her death row existence. Every day was the same. She’d be awoken at dawn by fire alarm type bells. Then she’d wash up from a cold-water tap and sit on her bunk, eat a bowl of porridge. Then she’d be forced to stand, for an hour, in her cell, in contemplative silence.

Afterwards, she’d be sent to labor. Her job: sweeping the floors. All day, she’d pace the cells, various parts of the prison, sweeping the floors. Made to wear a special red prison uniform that labeled her a death row inmate, she was avoided by other inmates, considered “unlucky.”

During the day she was only allowed two short breaks. One for lunch, which consisted of just a bowl of rice and small chunk of pork fat, and the other for dinner- another bowl of rice and a small piece of cabbage. At dusk she’d be marched to group exercise in the yard, and then returned to her cell, where she’d be made to sit in silence for two hours with her 12 roommates, watching programming on a TV that’d be brought in on a rolling cart.

The programming was of the educational variety, often about Chairman Mao or the Anti-Japanese War or about Marxism.

She wondered why she’d need to watch politically bent programming when, after her conviction, she’d been stripped of all political rights for the rest of her life, or at least the remaining year of it, anyway.

Then at night, she’d stay awake. She didn’t want to sleep because she didn’t have much time left. So, she’d lie in bed, stare at the cockroaches crawling up the walls, or write in her diary. She’d wanted to write to her parents, old friends, but everyone she knew had cut off contact with her following her arrest, so she wrote to herself.

She wasn't allowed a pen so she'd used her own blood as the ink. She'd written that she'd collected a cup of her blood, from her period, and dipped a bamboo stick in it, used it as her pen. The paper she'd swiped from an office she was cleaning...

How deeply impressed I was by her legerdemain...

Like her face, her writing didn't convey much feeling. Until the last entry. It was the only part where she'd shown emotion.

The last entry was written the night before her execution. In it, she pondered who she could have been if she'd not been born poor. If she'd been her boss's daughter. If she'd been related to a high-ranking member of the Party. If she'd been born in a rich country like Japan or in Europe or a person in a bootlegged movie she'd seen from America or Hong Kong, those movies that her and her friend would watch at an uncle's house, on his VCR.

She wondered if she was free to have as many kids as she wanted, if she'd have two or three, so she could have both boys and girls. Or if she could live in a big house with the robot machines that washed clothes and dishes for you.

She wished she could have been someone else. Lived another life. She wondered if there'd be a Heaven or afterlife like she'd heard some people believed. If she'd see her aborted baby in Heaven. Who that baby would have been, a boy, a girl? A person like her?

"I'm not a monster," she wrote, "I did what they're doing to me. If it's justice, it's justice. If it's murder, it's murder. It's whatever it is. It couldn't have been worse..."

"I brought shame to my family. There's nothing I can do to make up for that. But I believe my death will end much of their suffering, end much of their shame. For that, I'll be happy to die tomorrow. I'm sorry to them, I'm sorry to my family that I couldn't do better in school, land a better job, be in a better situation. That I'm a disappointment... I am truly sorry to my parents. But I'm not sorry to anyone else."

These words were the same as the final statement she'd made. I guess she'd prepared them in blood first.

(It struck me that death row inmates in their final hours were probably the only people in China with true freedom of speech, unafraid of the consequences their words would bring. I had trouble imagining anyone else in China speaking or writing publicly with such candor...)

It took most of the evening to read, translate the diaries. Once I finished them, I set the letters down. Then I went out to the street to buy some cold noodles for a fast dinner.

Sitting on a plastic stool beside the noodle stand, on the street corner, I used my wooden chopsticks to pick and twirl and slurp up the salty, spicy noodles. As I ate, I panned my gaze around the campus. It was late. Most of the students were back in their gender-separated dorms, ahead of campus curfew.

Off towards the manmade lake near the campus library's clocktower, a few young couples were holding hands, strolling in the smoggy distance. In the square in front of the library, a large group of late middle-aged and elderly women were dancing, doing aerobics to repetitive techno music blasting from a distorted speaker. The women wore surgical masks as they danced. Some moved faster than others.

I wondered what would happen if all one billion people in China were to do aerobics at the same time. If it would push the Earth out of its orbit. I think I read about that somewhere.

My eyes started to burn again, but there were no skeletons, or at least any I could see. The smog was growing thicker in the distance, and I noticed that my chopsticks were two long, thin severed fingers and that my bowl of noodles was full of bloody human tongues.

I retched, cringed, and dropped the fingers, cupped my hands over my face. I drew in a deep breath, twitched, and lowered my hands. I cautiously looked back down and found that the bowl was empty, and the chopsticks were gone.



二十一

Walking back to my apartment, an icy rain trickled from the sky, burned and tickled my skin as it touched into me. The smog had picked up considerably, too, and there'd been a car accident, a pile-up, on the road nearby. This had been common these days, with the smog, cars smashing into each other on the roads and highways due to lack of visibility, cars crashing into each other even more than usual.

Trudging up to my fifth-floor apartment, I felt a grunge. It was a gauze of grogginess not wholly unlike fatigue but more electric, stimulated. I looked left, but it was so hazy out that I couldn't see anything from my apartment building's stairwell windows, not a mere flicker of light shone from the chemical plant.

I stepped inside my apartment, pressed the heavy steel door shut, and flicked on the lights. As I turned on my heels, I gasped at the sight of Lily. The ghost, the beautiful murderess sitting on my couch.

Her lips sloped into a crooked smile, she sat with her legs crossed, arms spread wider than Jesus as she leaned back into the cushion. She was translucent as last night, but brighter than before, glowing, phosphorescently. This time she was clothed, in the white blouse and blue jeans she'd worn the day of her execution.

“They shot me dead. But you shot life inside me, dear,” she spoke, and a bluish mist puffed from her mouth, accompanied her words.

“Are you real?” I asked and a rattling, buzzing sound, like a saw, sounded off in the distance.

She frowned, looked at the floor and glumly told me, “When you die, you don’t really die, most of the time, until later. The spirits here, ones who died in jail, or were shot in the chest, they said they were still alive, their brains were alive, and they saw everything, but couldn’t speak or react. They didn’t really die until they were put into the crematorium. They felt a lot more pain being burned, they said. Not me, though, I was shot in the brain. I went out like a light. I saw my soul leave my body.

“As I said, dear, it was an orgasm, dying, such a euphoric rush,” she said, her tone rising, and went on, “and it is easier than being a body, just being a spirit. It’s fun, to travel around and play tricks on the living, move things, misplace keys. The living can be so stupid. Life is so totally wasted on them.

“But, yes, dear, I’m as real as you think I am.

“I’m here. I’m always here... I’d love to travel, but I’m confined to only the areas I lived, this town, this prison. There’s no invisible wall that keeps me from moving. It’s just that these are the only places I am.”

Lily reached over to my coffee table, tried to pick up a box of the civet shit coffee. The box went through her hand, which made her sigh, and she continued speaking with me, and I sat down next to her.

“I can’t always touch objects. Sometimes I can. Sometimes I can’t. People, I’ve wanted to touch, talk with, but I never could. Until you. Why is that?”

“I wish I knew. But, sorry to say, I’m still not convinced you’re real,” I told her, looking straight at her, speaking loudly to reach my words over the sawing sounds.

“Every ghost I’ve seen in a movie or on TV, in a book, they speak in like ‘raaah’ kinda of bursts, maybe a word or two here or there. But you’re so lucid.”

I put my arm around her. She felt like a body. Was warm. I could smell her scent. It was like roses. I leaned over, pressed my lips to hers. We kissed, a deep, wet hot kiss. Tonight, her tongue was like a warm slippery stone. After a few seconds of locking lips, we broke apart.

“Whoa, that felt real,” I told her, my body trembling.

She gazed knowingly in my eyes, replied, “It’s as real as you think...”

“You said I shot life into you. So does that mean, if we’re together, if we stay together, you could live?” I asked, twirling a finger around in her shiny black hair. It was so light and soft as a feather.

Her expression soured.

“Not like this,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked, reaching for her hand, but she jerked it away, shifted her gaze towards the windows, and spoke in a poignant, staccato rhythm.

“Listen, dear, they know magic. Black magic. Blood magic. They harbor grudges.”

“Who?” I implored, drawing myself closer to her.

But she recoiled, scooted to the end of the couch, away from me, curled up into a fetal position, and her tone shifted to a trembling, lugubrious cadence, “The demons. They’ve seen the offerings, they’ve seen the fires by the school, but it’s not enough. It’s only scraps. The demons, they’re insatiable. They want not only the flesh, the blood, and the bones, they want the cement.

“They need to destroy the school. Swallow it into their grave of night.

“Nearby the school, those smokestacks, the chemical plant there. It will explode. A fireball will wash over the school and surrounding area. It’ll be a ghastly explosion. The lick of a fire that size can send the ghosts and demons back to the Underworld. When it burns they’ll dance... They’ll be free. The grounds will be contaminated for years.

“The poisoned land will be their legacy, their vengeance. It will preserve their privacy and sanctity.

“The forthcoming inferno, it’s the expense of progress. The demons’ debt to be repaid.

“We will all leave this place, Kim. We’re just passing through. Death is the destiny of everyone,” she told me, with the saddest expression I’d ever seen painted across her pretty face, like that of a sad clown.

“When you die, dear, it’ll be known, who you really were... And when you join the sky, dear, I hope to see you...” she whispered and then dissolved, with a whooshing sound, shifted into a small pink cloud, and floated up and through the ceiling...



二十二

Seeing her go was a punch in the stomach. My eyes burned, and hot tears streamed down my cheeks.

But then it all made sense. Her presence. Her telling me. What I’d learned and seen. I knew. I knew their motives. Their actions. Their offerings and missives. My blood boiled and my lips quivered. My body trembled with rage.

The hateful spirits wanted their vengeance, to push us out.

I got up, looked out the window, and saw that a curtain in the vaporous smog had parted. I saw ghosts of dead convicts, hundreds of them, in their prison uniforms, in the drizzly rain, marching in a single file line down the road, surging forward, on their way towards the chemical plant. I recognized the ghosts, too. I knew them! I'd seen them in dreams! I'd seen them banging on doors! I'd seen them digging in the distance! I'd seen them kneeling to the rifles! I'd seen them staring from windows!

Then the drilling sounded, buzzing louder than an airplane engine...

NO! I wouldn't allow the ghosts' treachery!

THEY were dead. But WE were alive. Just because they'd suffered didn't mean we had to!

My heartbeat thumping, my teeth chattering, I seized my phone. Using my translation software, I alerted the local police of a terrorist threat, a plot to explode the chemical plant, and I sent the message from the dark web where it'd be untraceable.

After I sent the warning, a tingly warm wave of calm washed over me, and I stood at my window where I would soon see firetrucks, ambulances, and the cops and PSB (the People's Security Bureau) swarm in and illuminate my windows in flashing blue and red lights, and I would gaze out, grinning at the police circling around the plant's leviathan glitter...

I would stand on my tiptoes and applaud, laugh and cheer for the PSB, in their blue helmets, the men looking and moving like militant turtles. While watching their movements, their formations, my guts would catch on fire, and I would grab the empty pages of Lily's prison diaries, the palimpsest, and on those yellowed pages I'd write a story about the ghosts, the prison's history, and for the purpose, use my blood as the ink of the first draft.

I'd sit up until the small hours of night, typing it out on my laptop and post it online, so it could go from brain to brain, in a digital form of telepathy, so the stories of those involved could be heard. So the ghosts could have their say and be fed!

I stood at the window knowing that tomorrow I would read online that the chemical plant was shut down due to numerous health and safety violations. Then my insomnia would stop. And the demons would stop drinking my sleep.

The car accidents on the road could return to their normal frequency, and the ghosts in the school would merely be memories...

The police would conduct further background checks on all the school's foreigners, and like I anticipated Fat Elvis will be found to have been convicted of child molestation charges in another country, probably in Southeast Asia, probably Cambodia. He would quickly be fired and deported and Marco and I would spit in his face as he was led away in handcuffs.

That pair of young, clean-cut teachers, the cult members who'd invite everyone to their apartment, peddling Jesus and home church services, they would be outed as undercover missionaries and their several stacks of homemade Bibles, translated into Chinese, would be confiscated from their apartment and be burned by the PSB. They'd no longer be handing them to students, discretely, along with paper bags of homemade chocolate chip cookies. The clean-cut pair would be deported and banned from China, praying to Jesus, praying for salvation for the souls of the police who'd chained them.

"Forgive them, for they know not..." they'd writhe and bellow, in shackles, on their way to the airport.

Rooster would do a runner. No one would know where he'd gone, but we'd all wish him the best and clink glasses to his name.

The rest of us would stay out the year. Marco would become Marco again, begin to dress normally again, wearing Miami Heat team gear nearly every day as he'd done before.

Most of the foreigner teachers would leave the school after their 1-year contracts expired. The leavers fleeing China, on to other schools in Asia, the Middle East, or Europe. Marco would go to Colombia, like he mentioned, and a couple teachers would go back to their home countries. The only foreigners staying would be Tony, the Tasmanian Ninja and the Man-bun: The China Lifers.

And me. I'd stick it out. I'd survive my contract. Go back, triumphantly, to FIU as a tenured professor and return to the golden sheen of the Florida sun. I'd go to the beach every weekend and breathe in the clean, salty sweet sea air, and never take it for granted again.

And I'd think of Lily. A lot. I'd miss her, miss her dearly. I'd paint a portrait of her and stare longingly at the painting. Every time I'd look at it, she'd become more beautiful. Eventually I'd memorize every angle of her face.

I'd lay and stare at her photos and wonder if she was my soulmate and ponder how tragic it would be to have a soulmate who was dead or from another time, place. A person you could never know.

And I'd wonder if her telling me of the chemical plant, if it was her atonement, and if it let her ghost die, move on to the next realm...

But, of course, I wouldn't know for sure. I would be filled with an ineluctable sense of dread. I would worry for her soul, her ghost and decide that, to ensure she'd find peace, I'd take her as a ghost bride, as per traditional Chinese custom. After the séance, after making my vows, I'd delete all her photos and articles from my phone and laptop. Then, after kissing her painting, I'd burn it, along with her blood diaries and fling the ashes from my bedroom window, off into the chilly mist of night...

I would hope to God that the séance would allow Lily's soul to finally rest and that maybe I could see her again in the sky, in the next realm, or in another life...

But all this could wait. I was exhausted, drained from the ordeal. Without even taking pills, I walked, somnolently, with stone footsteps to the bed, and I lay supine, pressed my head to my cold pillow.

I drifted off, having no evil visions, no fear of nightmares, and when I heard the fireworks, I felt the boom and quake, and my body tensed up and then loosened when the white wave washed over, into the release.

